

JOAN'S GARDEN OF ADVENTURE



LILIAN GARIS

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JOAN'S GARDEN
OF ADVENTURE



WITH TWO NOISY "CHAWS" SKIP ALMOST FINISHED JOAN'S
BOUQUET.

Joan's Garden of Adventure.

Frontispiece—(Page 49)

JOAN'S GARDEN OF ADVENTURE

By

LILIAN GARIS

Author of

"JOAN; JUST GIRL," "GLORIA: A GIRL AND HER
DAD," "GLORIA AT BOARDING SCHOOL," ETC.

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JOAN'S GARDEN OF ADVENTURE
GLORIA: A GIRL AND HER DAD
GLORIA AT BOARDING SCHOOL

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JOAN'S GARDEN OF ADVENTURE

CHAPTER I

THE TRAIN TRIP

"It won't rain, Tillie, and I wish you'd stop talking about it." Joan marked her impatience with a thump on the suit-case cover. "Anyhow, if it does, to-day isn't Margaret's wedding day; it's to-morrow."

"A lot you know about the weather. My big toe says rain, a long spell of it, so you may as well leave your rainy things out. You'll need 'em." Tillie, in her capacity as maid in the home of Joan's grandmother, which was Joan's home also, assumed the position of general advisor, general manager, and general trouble-maker, at times. This was one of the times.

"Your big toe!" scoffed Joan. "As if that could tell."

"Knows more about the weather than al-

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manacs and prophets. I tell you, Joany, it's gonna rain."

"Oh, let it. I'm busy. You better run down and see if Grandma wants her beef tea."

"Good way to get rid of me." Tillie was not very cross, just cross. "But anyway, I've got to give Esmeralda her drink. Poor forlorn cat! Hasn't had a nip since dinner time; goin' on three hours. Ouch! There it goes again. If that ain't rain all I can say is my big toe's gone crazy," and the garrulous maid limped off to attend to the needs of her mistress, and incidentally to feed her much spoiled pet cat, Esmeralda.

Joan dropped the article she had folded ready for packing, flew to the window and searched the sky anxiously.

"It mustn't rain," she told herself. "It just can't. There's all the rest of the whole year for rain and there's only such a little while for Margaret's wedding day." She sighed conclusively. Her blue eyes took on some of the gray shadows filtering through the hazy summer morning. It was wonderful; so very wonderful, that Margaret was going to marry Joan's Uncle Roger. The romance had started during the war, when Roger Benson lay wounded in a foreign hospital, and Margaret Lane, the young nurse, helped to

care for him. Then, later, when he was called away Margaret had only his number and loving memories; didn't even know his name.

It was a long and interesting story, Joan's story told in the first volume, "Joan: Just Girl," and now as she prepared for the climax of all her own romancing and Margaret's love story, Joan was determined that it should not rain.

Tillie had the dark-side habit; she could never see any chance of a streak of sunshine making its way through a group of clouds, although everybody knows that a brave little sun-ray can battle successfully, for a time at least, against lazy, loafing gray-gloom shadows, and if the good old west-wind joins forces, those clouds have to float away to other storm centers. No rain can ever set up its pipes against such opposing forces.

Joan searching found, not only one sun-ray, but whole colonies of them, and also, she noted, the west-wind was blowing its best. It couldn't rain, it shouldn't and it wouldn't.

One would have to understand that Joan was going on a half day's journey to Margaret's wedding, also that Ethel, her best friend, was going with her. This being their very first trip (of any importance), it was reasonable to hope for the very best weather. What with a lovely new chif-

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fon hat, she would have to wear to save packing dangers, and her crisp organdie dress, although that was not the one she would wear as Margaret's maid of honor (Oh, being a maid of honor!), now, with all this to consider for herself, and just exactly as much to consider for Ethel, could any one blame Joan Marsh for insisting upon perfect weather?

Lovingly she folded her pretty crêpe nightgown and placed it on top of the other folded garments in her suit-case. It was all so thrilling. Joan had not always had such luxuries. In her early childhood, and even up to a few months ago, she lived in Brackin Lee, not exactly an orphanage, but certainly not a home like this; with her Grandmother Benson affectionately called Mumsey, now able to move about, cured of her years of semi-invalidism.

"If Grandma could only come to the wedding," sighed Joan wistfully. "But then, it's lovely to have her walk even a little, so we must be satisfied."

Tillie was singing her regular morning dirge in the kitchen below; at least, the effort was intended for singing but the result was not exactly melodious. But Tillie was a creature of habit and it was her habit to sing every morning while she

scraped the oat-meal sauce-pan. It might rain, as she dolefully predicted, but she chanted her oat-meal-pan-washing anthem just as faithfully as if she had expected the day that Joan hoped for.

"Call to me when you see Ethel coming!" screamed Joan. But Tillie never paused.

"Till-lee! Tell me—when—you see Eth-el's—car!" The scream was intensified.

"She ain't," came back Tillie's shrill reply.

"I know she 'ain't' now," continued Joan. "But she will be—soon!" she shouted. "Let me know——" The humming of a car cut short the harangue. Ethel was not only coming, but she had come.

Followed excitement. Two girls going off on a long train trip—their first—to be bridesmaid and maid of honor at a wedding! Was it any wonder that Joan was nervously impatient with the maid, and that Ethel could only talk in gaspy little chunks?

Mrs. Benson, the groom's mother, Joan's grandmother and the very sweetest young grandmother any one would wish to own, was repeating her instructions to the excited girls.

"Remember, dears, don't leave your bags down and forget to watch them. They might easily be picked up."

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"We'll remember, Mumsey. Ethel, your hair looks lovely."

"If it only doesn't rain," replied Ethel, very carefully touching the side-waves of her dark hair with gentle hands. "Isn't it mean, it's so damp?"

"And pay attention, Joan dear," again spoke the grandmother. "You are to tell Roger, first thing, that he must telegraph those two young soldiers who visited him here. They won't be able to go to his wedding, but we promised to let them know."

"Oh, I shan't forget that, Mumsey. The boy with the crooked smile was so—jolly."

"And tell Margaret—I am waiting for her to come home as—my daughter——"

"Mumsey!" Joan dropped her bag and caught her grandmother's hands. "Mumsey-love, Margaret isn't going to be your daughter, same as I am?"

Mrs. Benson smiled as she bent to kiss the impetuous girl confronting her.

"No, darling. Not just exactly the same. But we both love Margaret——"

"You bet," broke in Ethel, reverting to her tom-boyish expression quite naturally in spite of her recent better training. "Margaret is a love,

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and—oh, Joany, here's the car. Pile in. Grab your bag."

"There's your flowers. Good-bye, Tillie; good-bye, Mumsey——"

"Oh, Tillie! I forgot my lace handkerchief. It's in the blue book on my dresser," cried Joan.

"An' ain't y'u gonna take the pie——" Tillie's voice was accusing.

"Oh, the—pie——" Joan.

"The pie!" Ethel.

"Tillie's pie," Mrs. Benson.

"My best mar-range," Tillie herself.

"Of course we'll take it," declared Joan bravely. "I'll put it in the bottom of my hat-box."

"Oh, you couldn't," demurred Ethel. "It's all sticky and run-ny!"

"I don't care. It's Tillie's wedding present and we've got to carry it."

"It's all done up right," explained Tillie, who had returned with the handkerchief and was holding forth the pie. "It's set right down in my white 'namel puddin' dish with a cover on top and it can't spill nor run. Just keep it out of the sun an' it'll be all right."

"Lov-ell-ly," cooed Joan, taking the well

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wrapped pie by its string, although she could only spare two fingers for the task.

"Do come," begged Ethel; "if we should miss that train——"

"We shouldn't; I'm ready. Good-bye, Mumsey"—another kiss—"and we only wish you were coming——"

"Give my boy a wedding kiss for me——"
There were pardonable tears in Mrs. Benson's eyes.

"Come along——"

More calls, cautions and admonitions from the porch, answered by waves, squeals and nervous little exclamations from the auto, and finally Joan and Ethel were on their way to the wedding at Hillsdale.

To the girls it was like a fairy story. That they, who only a few months before had been obscure inmates of Brackin Lee, should both now be in such lovely homes, Joan with her own grandmother, and Ethel with her foster mother, the splendid Mrs. Bryan Burke, and that added to these important facts was the unbelievable circumstance of a long train trip to Margaret's and Roger's wedding seemed wonderful indeed.

"Doesn't it seem wonderful that your Uncle Roger really found his war-time sweetheart?" re-

marked Ethel. She had disposed of her bag in the overhead train rack, she had helped Joan to get the pudding-dished pie under the seat and she was finally ready to talk.

"From the first time I heard the story," replied Joan, smoothing her summer coat on the reversed seat in front of them, "I just knew it would have to come out right. But, of course, I never dreamed that Margaret's soldier-lover could be my own Uncle Roger."

"He's like an actor" (Ethel's idea of perfection), "and Margaret is so lovely. Joan, when we get back and start in on our adventure, do you believe we can really—carry out our plans?"

"Why, Ethy! Of course we can. We are to have a summer of absolute freedom, to try out our own ideas. I'm not a bit afraid to experiment and it's a perfectly wonderful chance. Mumsey is a dear to let us, and I hope, Ethel, you're not going to back out."

"Why, no, of course not, Joany. I was just thinking."

"Then always think of what we are going to do, not of things we may not be able to do," counseled little Joan.

"All I can say is," announced Ethel, "that we're the luckiest girls on earth. Joan, look"—in

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undertone—"right over there, second seat up. No, the other way——"

"Yes?"

"Isn't that rainbow hat just sweet?"

"Wonder what's under it?" replied Joan, crisply.

"If it's a homely face under such a lovely hat——"

"There!" The head, with the hat on, turned. "Now, do you think it's pretty?"

"Of all things! How could a girl with such a face choose such a hat? Oh, isn't she—too homely?"

"But then, Ethel dear, homely folks may like pretty things, as well as do other folks," remarked Joan, with assumed wisdom. "Now, I love red."

"And you think you can't wear it on account of your hair. Well, you can just as well as not. Mother says a great dressmaker artist she heard of always dressed his red-haired women in red."

"Thanks, Ethy. That's the first time you ever admitted my hair is red."

"It isn't. It's a golden brown. And your darling curls!" She touched a cluster of soft ringlets that fell over Joan's shoulder. "I do think, Joan Marsh, you ought to be resigned to

any bad luck having such a head of hair as you have."

This was a typical Ethel speech, and Joan said so, good-naturedly. But the sights about them within the train, and the sights beyond them, flashing by, outside the train, were quite too interesting and novel for other and more personal considerations.

Each girl bought a magazine but neither gave it much attention. Then Joan bought a box of peanut brittle and Ethel insisted upon buying two chocolate bars, although Joan feared such nibbling would spoil their lunch which was to be eaten in mid-afternoon.

"And I had such a time choosing things easy to eat on the train," she confided in an undertone.

"Mother fixed me up the loveliest box. It's right on top of my satchel. I guess it won't give us any bad habit to eat between meals when we're traveling."

"There goes your rainbow girl for a drink," Joan remarked. "Oh, my! She almost fell into that old lady's lap!"

Small as the near-accident was, it served to provoke humor and gave Joan and Ethel such a spasm of merriment that they had to choke back their usual gales of laughter.

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When the girl came back from the water faucet, bearing in each hand a paper water cup filled, Joan lay over on Ethel's shoulder to shut off the sight.

"If she wobbles with those cups!"

But she didn't, so our girls presently fell back to talking of Margaret and her wonderful wedding plans.

CHAPTER II

JUST ONE ADVENTURE

"THERE'S a cab," said Joan importantly; "we'll take that."

"Oh, see that poor old man over there," Ethel pointed out. "Let's patronize him. He looks so forlorn."

"All right," agreed Joan, picking up her suitcase. "But he looks rather old to drive a car."

The younger man with the yellow-striped taxi had surrounded the two new arrivals, but Ethel waved him off and beckoned the old fellow with the "chariot."

He was deaf. They both shouted instructions to him.

"To Miss Lane's," yelled Joan; "know where that is?"

"Shu-er, the hotel?"

"No," Ethel took up the refrain. "To Miss Margaret Lane's, on Orchard Place."

He caught the last words. "Oh, yes. Git right in—Orchard Place," and he started to fuss over

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the wheel. The car had been a very good one in its day—a long time ago.

"Miss Lane's, you know," Joan sang out again for good luck, while Ethel distributed the baggage.

"All right," called back the veteran, over the noise of the chugging motor, and presently they were off.

"Tired?" Ethel asked. It had been a long afternoon on the train.

"A little," admitted Joan. Then she remembered and exclaimed. "Ethy! We should have waited for Uncle Roger to meet us! How could we have forgotten?"

"Oh! that's so! Well, never mind. Perhaps it's just as well."

"But he may be there, waiting?"

"He wasn't."

"There goes a car down that avenue——"

"Well, he will know the train is in, and so I guess he would not be much put out," smoothed Ethel.

"I hope not," intoned Joan, dolefully.

"It's after seven," said Ethel. "Our train was late. I hope we won't bother them with supper. They'll be tired and busy."

"I couldn't eat anything. Guess train riding is rather tiring, after all. This car can run, at any rate." They had just taken a series of bumps and jounces and were entering a wooded strip of road.

The old driver turned back to them reassuringly.

"Right over there," he wheezed. "'Hind that there clump of syc'mores."

"All right," smiled Joan, her smile more explicit than her words.

A few minutes later old Jerry (he gave them his name when they refused to take his change) left the two girls and their two bags at the entrance to what appeared to be a rather long, winding lane, leading to a house situated far back from the road. They couldn't see the house, except mere blotches of it among the trees, and the wild growth of underbrush, weeds and tall ferns cluttered about the old stone gate-post, offered the girls a sort of dreary welcome.

Neither remarked it, but both felt it. They picked up their bags and trudged along under the heavy trees. It was almost dark, too dark for so early in the evening.

"I do believe we are going to get Tillie's old rheumatism rain, after all," remarked Joan, as a

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distant rumble sounded through the dense haze.

"Yes, sir; it is raining!" exclaimed Ethel, tragically. "We'd better run."

"With these bags? Say, Ethel, isn't this—queer? No wedding signs around—this old place!"

"Maybe we're wrong!"

"Oh, the rain! We'll have to take our hats off and hide them from it, somehow."

"What'll we do if this is not the right place?"

"Ethy! Your old cab-driver was deaf——"

"There's some one coming! Look! It's a boy!"

"Thank—goodness——"

"Mercy—me! Joany! Here come two fierce dogs!"

All dogs, both fierce and gentle, have an instinctive grudge against bags and baggage, and when the two hounds pounced down upon our girls, Ethel screamed and Joan gave sharp orders.

"Here you!" she shouted. "Come here, Spot! Lie down!" The words didn't matter; it was the tone of voice that meant something to the surprised dogs. They drew up suddenly and sniffed Ethel's bag suspiciously. The boy was hurrying towards them.

"Does Miss Margaret Lane live here?" Joan

called out to the boy. He was barefooted, bare-headed and his chopped off over-alls were no browner than the thin legs they fell over. It wasn't too dark to see how thin and poor-looking he was and to notice his heavy black curly hair.

"Lane?" he repeated in surprise.

"Yes; Miss Lane," reiterated Ethel, sensing disaster.

"Nope," he answered, putting his foot out to boss the two dogs that seemed now too eager to make friends.

"She doesn't?" cried both Joan and Ethel.

"Nope. Old Miss Kane lives here——"

"Kane! He thought we said Kane for Lane!" Joan charged, as if blaming Ethel for patronizing the deaf hack-driver.

"Do you know where Miss Lane lives?" Ethel inquired mournfully.

"It's rainin'," said the boy. "Hadn't you better hurry up to the house before—before you get all spoiled? I can carry both bags."

"Oh, thank you," breathed Ethel. "But if we're at the wrong place——"

"You sure are. You mean Miss Lane who's going to be married? Well, she lives clear out Long Hill way. I fetched a lot of hemlock branches out there to-day." He was carrying a

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bag in each hand and the girls, with hats hidden (upside-down) were hurrying along the lane after him.

It was so disappointing! To expect to arrive at a house of merriment and to land in this dreary place instead. Somehow Joan blamed Tillie for predicting rain and she blamed Ethel for patronizing the deaf cab-driver and she blamed herself for being stupid.

"She's deaf," said the boy, as they stepped up on an old ramshackle porch. "And don't mind her ways, she's just cranky. Won't hurt nuthin."

They were at least grateful to the boy, who placed the bags well out of the shower's reach, then went inside.

They could hear him trying to explain, and judging from his tone of voice it was no easy matter.

Presently he appeared again. "She says 'come in,'" he said, pushing the creaky door further ajar.

Reluctantly the two daintily dressed girls edged in, through the disordered, dark and queer smelling hallway. By the light of a smoking oil lamp they saw an old woman huddled on a couch.

"You're astray?" she wheezed, as if the girls could help that.

Raising her voice to its utmost capacity, Joan yelled: "The hack-man made a mistake. He took Kane for Lane."

"Lane, Maggie Lane; she's getting married. Maggie's a good girl. Allus been kind to me. Carlos, give the girls a chair."

"Oh, we really must hurry," called out Ethel. "Our folks will be worried about us——"

"I'm goin' to drive you over," announced Carlos. "She said I could. I'll get the lantern."

"Oh, that's very kind," exclaimed Joan. She was wondering if she might offer to pay the old woman. She looked so forlorn; she might be in need.

"Can I give you—fifty cents?" she ventured, when the boy had gone out the back door. "I don't know what we should have done if we hadn't—come in here. Listen to that rain!"

"It's pouring!" exclaimed Ethel.

"Hide your money, child," whispered the old woman. "My brother Sam—he's a miser, and he—might be comin'." Her words seemed to hiss from her toothless mouth and while the girls were fearful they were also sorry for the poor old creature.

Obedying and at the same time managing to slip a couple of coins into the woman's hand, Joan, as

well as Ethel, welcomed the sound of wheels at the door.

"Good-bye, and thank you," shouted Joan, ready and anxious to leave.

"Thank you so much," added Ethel. She was noticeably nervous since the old miser had been mentioned, and she did not attempt to conceal the fact. Fairly dragging Joan toward the door, with repeated appeals to hurry, Ethel Burke now cared little for her best summer clothes and the bad summer shower. Her one anxiety was to escape from those sordid, miserable surroundings.

But the heavy rain was quickly clearing up the haze and brightening the evening, so that it appeared much lighter now, in spite of it being really later than when they had entered the house.

A little gasp of surprised mirth escaped Joan as she beheld "the rig" waiting. It was a black covered wagon, where there was a cover, the sort used by peddlers and country milk venders; and the horse—no Mary Pickford movie horse had ever looked thinner, bonier, funnier or queerer. Carlos was out on the porch gathering up the girls' bags quite expertly, and he said, "Better hurry," in a way that again suggested the miser Sam.

Climbing over the seats the girls each found a

box in the back of the wagon, and regarding the boy's admonition to sit in the middle and hold on the rail across the front seat if he "shook them up too hard," they both breathed easier when "Skip," the old horse, who certainly didn't seem prone to skip every road obstruction, rambled off.

The absurdity of the situation bore down upon Joan and she burst into a perfect gale of laughter.

"Don't," begged Ethel; "he'll think——"

"Go ahead an' laugh," called back the boy, good-naturedly; "Skip is good enough for the movies, ain't he?"

"Oh, he is so funny," agreed Joan, continuing to laugh. "But why—why do you call him Skip?"

"He does. Always skips everything. Now watch that hole. See it out there in the middle of the road?"

They stood up to see it.

"Now, just watch him skip it."

They were still standing, holding the uncertain rail, and just as Skip skipped over the bump Ethel jerked, lost her hold and screamed!

"Oh, mercy!" yelled Joan. "Stop, please."

But the boy had pulled the willing horse to a stand-still, and when Joan sorted out the boxes she picked Ethel from among them.

"My dress——"

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"Never mind your dress, Ethy," gasped Joan. "It's a good thing you didn't fall in that mud hole."

"Can I help you?" asked Carlos, gallantly.

"Oh, no. We're all right. I guess we're a little nervous from riding all afternoon," said Joan. She was sort of planting Ethel on the biggest box. "Just urge Skip along, please. Our folks will have the fire department out after us, if you've got any."

"We ain't," said Carlos whimsically. But, just the same, he did hurry along poor old bony white-washed Skip.

Out on a clear stretch of road it wasn't so bad. The rain was almost over and occasional autos passing brightened the landscape considerably. Joan felt impelled to say something sociable to Carlos. She asked him if he knew any one out Roamwood way.

"That's miles and miles from here, isn't it?" he inquired.

"Yes, our time-table made it out fifty miles. We were riding five hours but there were so many long waits and we stopped every few miles," explained Joan.

"Do you know where Central Junction is?" asked Carlos.

"Why, yes. That's a big factory place," replied Ethel.

"Well, I came from there. I don't belong out here. I'm just stayin', workin', at Kane's."

"Are they—good to you?" ventured Joan.

"Libby is. She's the woman. But old Sam—Get along there, Skip," he diverted; "do you want a drink of gasoline from that car?"

"He's calling to you—the driver," interrupted Ethel. "See, he's coming back."

The auto was turning and Carlos pulled the loose rein on old Skip.

"Oh, it's Uncle Roger! Roger! Roger!" Joan called. But her excitement was unnecessary, for Roger Benson, her Uncle Roger, the groom-to-be, was leaning out of his car and asking Carlos if he had seen anything of two strange girls who came in on the six-ten train.

Their anxiety over, the transfer from Carlos' rig to the touring car was merrily executed.

"Say, you little runaways!" charged Roger. "What do you mean by hiking off to a strange camp in the middle of the night?"

"We didn't. We got kidnaped by a deaf old hack-driver." Joan declared, as Ethel and her bag were lifted across the muddy wagon wheel.

"Well, you certainly did scare the folks," Roger

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remarked. "They were almost frantic, telephoning."

"How did you find us?" asked Ethel, beaming happily.

"Rounded up the hack-drivers, and old Jerry admitted he had taken you out to Kane's."

"And you missed us driving out there?" Joan was now seating herself in the auto.

"Couldn't help it. I drove one way while you were driving the other," explained Roger. He was looking very happy and very handsome, and our girls both secretly decided he was going to make a most attractive bridegroom. Their relief made everything look attractive now.

When Roger insisted upon Carlos taking a dollar—a whole dollar bill—for his part in the escapade the boy objected. "It wasn't anything. I liked the ride, and old Skip likes the rain——"

"Put it in your bank," insisted the young man. "And oh, say!" he exclaimed, "aren't you the boy who brought the evergreens to Miss Lane's to-day?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then here's another dollar. Fetch us some more to-morrow morning," and before the overwhelmed Carlos could object, the auto was going one way and Skip was headed the other.

CHAPTER III

THEIR BELATED ARRIVAL

IF the mistaken arrival at Kanes' was dreary and disappointing, the real arrival at Lanes' was jolly to the point of thrill. The happy soon-to-be-bride, Margaret Lane, was overjoyed to have Joan and Ethel come all the way from Roamwood to attend her wedding, for she and the two girls were friends from dear Brackin Lee, where Margaret had taught a class of the smallest girls and endeared herself to those older.

Such bustle and confusion! Margaret made her home with an elderly aunt, when she was at home, and now this Aunt Alice was as happy as any one in the excited household, giving orders and making suggestions, for it was going to be a summer-time wedding "with all the fixings," as Roger expressed it.

"But let the girls eat their supper, do, Maggie," begged Aunt Alice. Joan and Ethel were doing justice to a bountiful meal in spite of a running

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fire of questions and answers, coming and going from all hands.

"What say, Brownie?" Roger asked Margaret, "if a fellow took a hunk, a good sized hunk out of that wedding present pie right now? Even getting married doesn't cure hunger, and I've been rantin' 'round lookin' for these here young leddy vis'tors," he mimicked, making queer and comic sounds in pretense of real country dialect.

"It's a lovely looking pie in spite of its long journey," declared Margaret, who was untying the wrappings from Tillie's quaint gift.

"I'll say that for old cranky Till. She can make lemon pie that hums," praised the young man, seated on one of the wooden boxes lately emptied of its wedding gift. There he ate the generous piece of pie Margaret presented to him.

As yet the girls had little chance to look around, for Roger, Joan's uncle, had whisked them up the drive in his car, and Margaret, the bride, quickly whisked them into the house encircled in her arms. Following those pleasant preliminaries, Aunt Alice superintended a meal already prepared by Beasy, such a good-natured, jolly old Irish maid, that Joan could not help contrasting her with spindling, cross-grained Tillie.

"As soon as you finish that cake," said

Margaret, "you must see our bower. It's too lovely——"

"And if the mosquitoes expect to feast on an out-door wedding party, they are going to be disappointed," interposed Roger. "I saw one wedding out on a magnificent lawn, under a real honest-to-goodness bower of roses, and it was like a moving picture comedy. Everybody hitting and slapping at mosquitoes, and the bride——"

"I suppose," supplied Ethel, "she did nothing but kick at her lovely silk stockings——"

A roar of laughter interrupted Ethel. The vision of a bride kicking at her white silk stockings and making horrible faces anent mosquito bites and slaughter, was too much.

"I'm glad you netted in the porch, Roger," admitted Aunt Alice. "I should hate to see Maggie acting like that."

The girls enjoyed hearing Margaret lovingly called Maggie. The name had been their choice, and "Maggie Lane" as Ethel said, sounded so like a song they loved to "sing it."

As Beasy desisted in her efforts to force upon Ethel another piece of cake, and upon Joan another glass of milk, the girls were finally ready to inspect the wedding preparations.

"Just private, you know," explained Aunt Alice.

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"Maggie wanted it all private but I insisted upon a little time. Her dear mother was my baby sister and I helped with her wedding day——"

A flood of reminiscences followed, but Margaret and Roger, arm in arm, were pretending that Joan and Ethel were all the other guests, and while Roger whistled the wedding march, Margaret acted the bride; her rumpled gingham apron doing comedy work as a veil, and the family feather duster serving for a "shower bouquet." Thus they wended their way to a porch that opened from an old-fashioned drawing room.

"Now, see my mosquito-proof cage," demanded Roger proudly.

"How lov-ell-ly," exclaimed Ethel. "No wonder you call this a bower, Maggie."

"And so—so sweet!" Joan inhaled audibly. "My! How odorous! Regular perfume——"

"Factory," finished Roger. "But just look at our evergreen corner."

"I love hemlock," explained Margaret, "and Jerry has been robbing the woods——"

"Oh, we know!" interrupted Ethel. "Our farmer boy, Carlos, picked some for you, didn't he?"

"Picked hemlock? Likely the hemlock picked him," replied Roger. "This timber was picked

with a good healthy ax, and Carlos can wield one. He's a great little lad. Brownie talks so much to him when he's here he just snaps out answers like cutting coupons."

"That boy has a history," put in Margaret. "He has some reason for secrecy, but if I had more time——"

"You have had enough public work, Brownie. Just you let Carlos whistle——"

"Maybe we could help," interposed Joan. "He is such a good-natured boy."

"Now I insist that Carlos be left out of these wedding plans," spoke up Roger. "What do you say, Aunt Alice?"

"I entirely agree with you." (Ethel and Joan were enthusing over the evergreen corner.) "Maggie has done enough welfare work to take a rest now."

Roger tossed his arm over Margaret's shoulder affectionately. "She'll have plenty to do to keep me 'well-faring' hereafter," he said jovially.

"But what is this going to be?" asked Joan. She was regarding a sort of trellis built between two long French windows.

"That's where the ceremony is going to be performed," said Aunt Alice. "To-morrow morning we will all take a hand at applying flowers to the

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screen. We want it just covered with fresh blooms."

"Can you realize, Joany, that all this is true?" asked Margaret happily. "You had quite a hand in bringing it all about, you know."

"If Joany went with Mother Burke when she wanted to take her, I couldn't have gone to my home, and neither would you, Maggie, have found out all about Roger——"

"Oh, Ethy!" protested Joan, showing embarrassment. "The only reason I wouldn't go to any one but my own folks was——was——" She caught herself just in time. She was going to say because she "was too proud," but that might have reflected upon Ethel, who was so very glad to leave Brackin Lee and who so readily went to Mrs. Burke's home when Joan refused to do so.

It was natural that all this should be spoken of now. Margaret's wedding to Roger was to be such a happy climax to the girls' experience, first as children under the protection of a shelter called Brackin Lee, and now as young girls in ideal homes.

Margaret wanted to do many more "little things" before calling the day's work done, but her Aunt Alice objected, strenuously.

"You positively must rest," insisted the elder

woman. "I'll take the girls to their room and help them unpack their bags, and, Roger, you take that young lady off her feet——"

Before she could resist, Margaret was literally lifted off her feet and carried to the porch swing, by the sportive Roger.

"There now, young lady, see that you behave. I'm not going to have my bride all worn out from carpentry, plumbing and light housekeeping——"

But Joan and Ethel were following Aunt Alice through the lovely, rambling old house, up to their room in the west wing.

They continually exclaimed along the way. Everything was so lovely, one of those restful, velvety old homes that seem never too old, just well seasoned and richer in comfort year by year.

"And how could Margaret be contented at Brackin Lee after this?" wondered Joan aloud.

"She has always needed a well-filled life," explained Aunt Alice. "Even here she is ever trying to help some one. Now, there's that boy at Kane's, Carlos. She is very much interested in him. And let me tell you a secret," whispered the aunt, her blue eyes showing happy gleams under the softly shaded bed-room lamp, "I've asked Carlos to the wedding, and I've told him he may bring three other little boys along for company."

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"Goody!" crowed Ethel. "We were afraid it would be all grown-ups."

"Oh, no, my dear," corrected Aunt Alice. "We are having some young girls to meet you, of course."

Whereat Joan's face fell. She detested meeting strange girls—when she was being maid of honor for the very first time, and might make awkward mistakes.

"You see, dears," explained Aunt Alice, as she helped them remove the mulberry-colored coverlet from each of the twin beds, "Margaret is very much esteemed around here. What with her war record and her school records! My dear! There never was a more popular girl in Hillsdale than Margaret Lane." Her pride was surely pardonable.

"We can easily understand that," replied Joan, "and you don't know how wonderful it seems to have her for a real relative. Of course, I shall never call her *aunt*." She laughed merrily at the very idea.

"Well, you don't often call Roger uncle, do you?" injected Ethel. "Oh, my dress is wrinkled after all, isn't it?" She was very carefully shaking out the violet silk-mulle gown in which she was to appear as attendant at the wedding next day.

"I'll have your things all nicely pressed, don't worry," offered Aunt Alice, authoritatively.

"Why, we wouldn't think of giving Beasy all that work," objected Joan. "You see, Aunt Alice, we were taught to work."

"Well, you won't forget how by not doing any for a while. Beasy will have plenty of help tomorrow, and your things will be all nicely pressed and ready for you. Your journey must have been tiresome."

The girls insisted that the journey was a real adventure, and when they related the details of their experience at the queer Kane place, Aunt Alice looked quite serious.

"Libby Kane and her brother Sam have lived there for years," she recounted. "They were always fairly well to do until Sam speculated with his own money and Libby's as well. Some foolish sort of stock, you know. Now, I do believe they have very little left."

"Nothing, I should say," put in Joan.

"Nobody ever gets a look inside the old place," said Aunt Alice. "So how can we guess?"

"Well, we did," declared Ethel, "and we were glad enough to get out of it, I can tell you."

"I wouldn't wonder. And that young boy kept in such a place! He's so good-natured," said

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Aunt Alice, repeating the girls' own opinion of Carlos. "And what charity *others* around here might get is never offered to the Kanes. You see, no one can believe them in actual need."

"I'd like Carlos to bring the old horse Skip along to our wedding," said Joan dryly. "I do believe a real feed would do Skip a lot of good."

"He'll probably come; Carlos couldn't travel without his horse," declared Aunt Alice. "Well, my dears, just make yourselves at home. And if you want to come down on the porch for a while——"

"I guess we'll stay up here, thank you," said Joan. "It's so lovely and cool; and we can each have a bed and a book." She was noting the tempting bookcases, one in each end of the alcove.

"Very well. Sleep late and don't worry about wrinkled clothes. I want everybody in Hillsdale to wonder who the two pretty little bridesmaids are." Aunt Alice was charming when offering compliments.

"Pretty," repeated Ethel abstractedly. It was coming true, her dream—to be called pretty.

"How are my freckles, Eth?" asked Joan, as she tried to unkink an unkinkable curl of her near-red hair.

"Freckles! Joany Marsh! You look like an—angel in that pretty night gown!"

Which provoked such a spell of foolish mirth that Joan tried to fly by flopping from the highest point on the bed to the softest spot on the floor—made soft by Ethel's little heap of discarded clothes.

"There's pins in them!" Ethel confessed, warningly.

"When will you learn, Ethel Burke, to be tidy," mimicked Joan, squatting like a feathering hen in the nest of clothing.

"When friend curly-head Carlos and his old muddy horse both get fat," replied the untidy Ethel. "Joan, I'm going to dream of that smoky lamp chimney."

"I'm not. I'm going to dream that I'm the prettiest maid of honor that ever performed," Joan ended, defiantly.

"I'd rather dream of black-eyed Carlos," confessed Ethel. "But say, girlie, isn't this room——"

"Now don't, Ethel. Yours is gold and blue, and it's got to stay that way. This mulberry wouldn't match you at all."

"It's pretty, that's what I was going to say."

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"You needn't. I know it. I feel just like an heiress." Joan spread out the soft blue night dress. "Maybe we'll have our breakfasts in bed!"

"With our mail on a tray!"

"And a little white poodle-dog whisking his tail in our coffee——"

When they stopped laughing they were too tired to "say another word."

So they undertook to dream of the preferred visions, beauty for Joan, mystery for Ethel. But what they actually did dream, not even the dreamers ever knew.

CHAPTER IV

THE WEDDING

"Now Tillie can prattle about her old pains and aches for weather predictions," declared Joan. "No better weather comes than this. Just hear the birds!"

"And maybe my hair will stay in curl," hoped Ethel, testing one kid-twister to make sure all the ends of her dark hair were well within its confines. "You don't know how thankful you ought to be to have natural curls, Joany."

"But I always have to wear curls and you don't," argued Joan. "Oh, I'm so happy we are having a beautiful day. But, Ethy," she paused in her hair brushing and the curls flew up like loosened watch springs, "Ethy, I just hate to meet those Wallace girls."

"Joan Marsh! You're silly. Why don't you like strange girls? I guess you're too humble. Now, I just love to show off when I'm dressed up." Ethel wasn't exactly dressed up at the moment, for her new slip petticoat was short for a

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girl as long as she, and she didn't happen to have both stockings on, although she had a slipper on the bare foot. Ethel was nothing if not original in her costume habits, and no amount of training at Brackin Lee had changed her into what is usually called a tidy girl.

Cavorting around, her hair in curlers, her feet in a mix-up, her long rather lanky self coming out of a silk slip too prominently at both ends—well, Ethel was comical and Joan loved her that way.

"Here come our pressed things," she announced. "I hear Beasy giving orders. Joan, you don't suppose a boy'll be delivering them?"

"If you think so I'd advise you to get under the bed or into a closet," cautioned Joan. "You're not ready to receive boy callers just now."

But when Joan opened the door a young and not unattractive colored girl stepped in. Her arms were filled with the pretty wedding finery, and Joan made a place for them on the bed and on the long window seat.

"Oh, thank you," said Joan; "they're beautifully pressed."

"I'm Violet," announced the girl, "and Miss Alice says I should ask do you want anything else?"

Ethel poked her head out from the alcove.

"Oh, Violet, could you possibly get me a lump of starch?" she asked. "I've got a spot on my slipper——"

"Just let me have it," offered Violet. "I'll fix it," and she left them with Ethel's brand new white slipper in her brown hand.

"What happened to it?" Joan wanted to know.

"One single little measly salted almond hit it last night. They're greasy, those nuts——"

"Hurry, Ethy, we must go down. We can help with lots of things," declared Joan, who was plainly nervous and anxious to go down to Margaret.

"You run along," replied Ethel calmly. "We've got orders to look pretty, you know, and I've got to work up to that. You'll look pretty anyhow, you don't have to worry."

From that time until the minister arrived, there was the most unavoidable confusion of last minute details. But everything and everybody looked so lovely that preparations were soon forgotten in the flush of happiness at their completion.

Maud and Mabel Wallace proved to be very attractive girls and in no way critical, as Joan had feared. Maud was fat, too fat for style, but not too fat for Ethel's admiration. She instantly "adored" Maud, loved her chuck-il-y laugh, and

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her constantly flickering dimples. She had saucer blue eyes and real yellow hair, and was dressed in a pale green organdie dress, with a big floppy white and green hat. Maud Wallace was a typical picture girl, the sort that goes with apple blossoms and sunshiny landscapes.

Mabel, her sister, was so directly opposite in type that the contrast was most striking. Mabel was tall, dark, slender, lispy and languid. She drawled her words and herself with them. Joan found Mabel very easy to get acquainted with, and did not object when she offered to help her finish dressing.

"And the funniest thing, really, I can't imagine," drawled Mabel, patting Joan's sash. "The boys, don't you know. Just imagine having those messy farmer boys with that frowsy Carlos Kane."

"Oh, has Carlos come?" asked Joan. "I'm glad. Did he bring Skip?"

"Skip? You mean that cross-eyed lame boy who always acts like—sort of a—well, don't you know how cross-eyed boys act?"

"I don't really," replied Joan, good-humoredly. "But I meant Skip, his funny old white horse."

"Oh, a horse!" Surprise unlimited. "I suppose Carlos rode in. He never walks. He's the

queerest boy, Joan"—a complete change of manner—"you look perfectly darling in that dress."

"I'm glad. I want to look well to be Margaret's maid of honor. But I'm afraid I'm nervous." Joan glanced into the tilted mirror and saw reflected there a very pretty girl indeed, her cheeks flushed to tone nicely with her red-gold hair, and her simple blue silk-muslin dress making of her something quite angelic, that is, quite like the paintings of angels one sees over altars in big churches.

Ethel in her violet mull made a pretty picture also, and the curls over her ears did full credit to her anxiety concerning them. That is, they were tightly curled and seemed prettily permanent.

A rumble of soft music from below warned them it was time to "get into line," and Roger's happy face, poked into their door-way, verified the suspicion.

"All ready there, girls?" he asked. Then he stepped in and handed Joan a huge bouquet. "Here, Red-head," he said affectionately, "you're to carry this. Whew! But you do look sweet, both of you, *all* of you," he amended. "Be careful you don't stumble and spill down the stairs," and he hurried off leaving the girls divided in admiration between Joan's bouquet of Killarney

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roses and the splendid looking groom that Roger Benson undoubtedly was to be.

"Handsome!" exclaimed Mabel.

"He is," agreed Joan proprietorially. He was her uncle besides being a bride-groom.

"Ready?"

"Come on."

"Oh, just a minute, Ethel, there's a pin shows in your sash."

"Thanks, Maud, but there's lots more other places. I hope *they* don't show."

"Wait, Joan." Mabel touched the spray of flowers that, pinned in Joan's hair, fell softly over her left ear. "Are they—secure?"

"Guess so. Come on. There's Aunt Alice—"

Strains of the Wedding March were now unmistakable. All the girls (the Wallace sisters were to fill in with the party) now stepped sedately down each step of the stairs, Joan and Ethel leading until they met the bride in the hall below.

"How lovely she looks!" Mabel whispered.

The bride was radiant, lovely indeed. She wore a simple white georgette gown with a wonderful big white droopy hat. Her bouquet was lilies-of-the-valley and white lilacs, but her smile—that was Margaret Lane.



"ALL READY THERE, GIRLS?" HE ASKED.
Joan's Garden of Adventure.

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Guests were waiting all about the long parlors and the privileged few were seated out on the flower decked porch. Aunt Alice, in her silver silk, stood waiting, and when Joan looked into her dove-like eyes she forgot all about being nervous.

The music stopped and a hush fell upon every one. How sweet the flowers smelled! How wonderful it was to think that so simple a ceremony—there among friends, flowers and all the beauty that could be drawn together—would perform such a miracle!

Joan had wondered who was to be best man but she now saw him, a young soldier, standing beside Roger, his dark blue uniform adding a note of importance to the soft-toned picture. She heard Roger call him Graham, and then remembered it was Graham Philbrook for whom everybody had been so anxiously waiting.

He had sun-burned hair and was very tanned as if having come from some other climate. Ethel caught Joan glancing at him and being Ethel she winked, roundly.

But the minister was speaking. His voice was not solemn but pleasant, almost casual; and presently Joan glanced up wondering when she should take Margaret's bouquet while Roger would put

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the ring on her finger. Ethel stood so close Joan didn't dare to move lest she might whisper.

The ring was in Graham Philbrook's hand, it was time to take the flowers.

"With this ring I thee wed!" Roger repeated after the minister, and now the ceremony was almost over. With a sense of relief Joan looked out through Roger's mosquito netting into the path beyond.

Skip! There he stood in the drive, near the side of the porch, his left ear cocked as if listening to the service and his haunches slumped as if he would have liked to sit right down and let the old black wagon shift for itself.

Ethel's gaze followed Joan's, and just as the minister was about to pronounce the most solemn words Skip neighed! A prolonged tremolo, deep bass neigh. Then a whinny! Like a horse's cheering!

It was too funny! Some of the guests choked back titters, but Ethel didn't succeed very well with her attempt.

Another spasm of sound came from the path, and then Carlos was seen to climb stealthfully into the old wagon and tug at the reins. Skip backed up, down the path, away from the rose bushes and nearer the kitchen door, just as folks

fell to kissing the bride and saying things Joan and Ethel couldn't quite catch.

They were congratulations, of course, and being mumbled as usual, but the joke unconsciously provided by faded old Skip was of more interest to the girls than were these formalities.

"He's hungry. That's what made him—hol-ler!" Joan said to Roger at her very first opportunity. "Couldn't I slip out and tell some one to——"

"Want to run away and feed an old nag instead of looking pretty beside my bride! Joan Marsh! I'm surprised at you," he mocked, pulling a rose from her bouquet and sticking it in her rose-less ear.

"Please, Roger, don't speak so loudly," Joan begged, for the manly voice had boomed out, and folks were smiling very broadly at the flushing Joan.

She had kissed Margaret and told her how lovely everything was. A line of friends were now passing in and out offering their congratulations, and to Joan and Ethel, unaccustomed to such formality, the performance seemed very stilted and artificial. Many shook hands with the girls, who were introduced either by the bride, the groom or by Aunt Alice. This attention was

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perfectly joyous to Ethel, who beamed her pleasure, but to Joan the proceedings were rather embarrassing.

"If I could only slip out," she whispered to Ethel. "I am afraid Carlos and his boys may get their treat and drive off without treating Skip."

"They're about finished," whispered Ethel, referring to the hand-shaking guests. "And there's a side door over there."

While a very prim little lady with daisies on a black hat, delayed overly long and so blocked traffic around the bridal party, Joan did slip away. With one hand she held her bouquet cautiously as she made her way along a little bush-lined path toward the kitchen door, and with the other she drew her skirts safely around her so that neither sash nor fullness would "get caught" in rambling rose branches.

She found Carlos and his boys astride a bench, enjoying "good eats," including ice cream, and she found poor old Skip, just as she had expected, looking on.

"Carlos," she demanded, "didn't you bring any feed for your horse?"

"He don't deserve any. Hear that racket he made? Like as if he wanted to bust up the wed-

din'." Carlos flipped an extra-sized spoon of pink ice cream into his own expectant mouth.

"But I guess he was hungry and that's why he called," argued Joan, going up to Skip and patting his funny old head, affectionately. "I'll see what I can get for him. Here, little boy"—to one who was not eating—"will you hold my bouquet for a few minutes? Be careful of it, I want to keep it as long as I can."

She realized now she had made no preparations for the horse's feast she was so intent upon: in fact, she had had neither time nor chance to do so. But in spite of the necessarily busy time she encountered within the kitchen, Beasy was, as ever, the soul of good-nature, and promptly directed her to the vegetable pantry for carrots and apples.

"And sugar," suggested the jolly cook. "Horses love sugar——"

"Beasy," whispered Joan, while the stout one sliced fragrant fruit cake, "could I send a few bites to the sick old woman, Libby Kane, you know?"

"Happy thought. There's my last new shoe box in that cubby hole under the stairs; perfectly clean. Mind your dress. Here, Vi"—to Violet—"help Miss Joany gather a bit for a sick friend."

It took but a few moments to make the collection, and swiftly Joan went back to Skip and the boys, her box under her arm and her pan of apples and carrots in her hands. Loaf sugar was plentifully interspersed between the fruit and vegetables.

The boy they called Quirk still held the flowers and there was no doubt of the care he was bestowing upon the task. As Joan approached he stepped up and offered to hold the pan to Skip's sniffing snout and give Joan back her bouquet, but she refused.

"I just want to feed him," she explained. "It's so long since I've had a chance to feed a horse."

Intent upon the process, Joan had not noticed a man with a black box come up the path, nor could she have even suspected that a photographer was near, when, seeing the unusual sight of a ragged boy holding a beautiful bouquet of roses alongside of an unmistakably garbed wedding attendant, who was feeding a funny old nag apples and carrots, the photographer set his lens, aimed, and "shot" the picture!

A yell from the boys on the bench turned Joan around to see, also and at the same time Quirk turned to look, when——!

Skip, not wishing to pause in his wedding feast,

put his big head over Quirk's shoulder and with two noisy "chaws" almost finished Joan's bouquet.

"Mercy me!" cried Joan, futilely grabbing for the remnants of the flowers. "Oh, what a shame!"

But the camera-man was snapping again, and when the nice young soldier who had "stood up" with Roger came looking for her "to get ready for the bridal picture," he joined in the boy's merriment but consoled Joan with the promise of "a better decoration from the bouquets within the house."

It was exciting, to say the least, but then a wedding usually is, and Ethel's joy when Joan trusted her with the comical "secret" was as unbounded as the limitless Ethel could make it.

"No other picture would be as interesting as 'Joan and Skip,' " she declared, "and no other ever could be as funny as 'Skip's Flowery Meal.' "

Once more, a minute after the photographer had left and all the pictures were finished, Joan hurried to the back door.

"Don't break that box, Carlos," she warned, "and be sure to give it to Libby."

"I will, sure," replied the boy, as the other urchins reluctantly piled in the old black wagon for

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the return trip which would leave all festive joys behind them.

"Coming out to-morrow?" Joan asked Carlos, without any special reason.

"Maybe. But I'm not goin' to be around here much longer," he called out over Skip's flanks. "Hurry up, fellows. We'll all get the mischief for staying out so late."

And away they went, leaving Joan wondering.

CHAPTER V.

A QUEER REQUEST

FOR two days after the wedding Joan and Ethel enjoyed their visit with Aunt Alice. The bride and groom were off on their honeymoon, and the "quiet after the storm" gave opportunity for a real visit with its all-pleasant possibilities.

Characteristically the Wallace girls wanted to entertain them with a tea, but Joan begged off, and "exploring Hillsdale" was undertaken instead.

Aunt Alice had insisted upon packing away all the wedding presents herself, although the girls wanted to help her, but because Margaret and Roger were planning to spend the remainder of the summer traveling, as Roger had business orders to do—so, the bride and groom would only return to Hillsdale for a few days before again starting off.

"And I've promised to take care of everything until they settle down in the fall," Aunt Alice explained, "although I doubt if either of them will ever really settle down to an every-day life after their eventful war experiences."

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"Mumsey hopes Roger will find a way to live somewhere near Roamwood," explained Joan. "She knows he must take his position in a large city, but since he has been away in service so long, you can't blame her, Aunt Alice, can you?"

"Indeed, no," replied the little lady, who was tying the last piece of silver in its flannel case. "I find it lonely here sometimes, and *I'm* among many friends."

"Has Joan told you what *we*, she and I, are going to do?" asked Ethel. They were preparing for their second expedition with the Wallace girls.

"You mean all your wonderful plans to help Brackin Lee? Yes, she has given me an idea," replied Aunt Alice. "But I doubt the wisdom of two such young girls running a tea-room——"

"We're just crazy to get at it," enthused Ethel. "Ever since we played tea-party at the Lee we've been talking of a tea-room, and now! Just imagine Joan's Mumsey letting us do as we please with the whole place."

"It's just like her. She always was so generous and good-natured. Ah, me!" sighed the silver-haired one, "and she is going to take my little Peggie——"

"Did you used to call Margaret Peggie?" asked Joan.

"Yes, she has been Margaret, Maggie, Madgie and Peggie, according to my mood," replied Aunt Alice. "But now she is—Mrs. Roger Benson. Isn't that hard to understand?"

"Joan has been preparing a record book and she insists upon calling it 'A Garden of Adventure,'" explained Ethel. "But I can't see where the garden comes in. We hope we'll sell more tea than pansies," insisted the prosaic Ethel, intent upon personal affairs.

"You are not a bit poetical, Ethy," Joan reminded her. "A Garden of Adventure doesn't mean a flower garden——"

"Oh, onions, and turnips! I'm no good at farming—never was," chirped Ethel, "and if you go in for it, Joany, you won't be able to see outside your freckles."

Joan's impatience left her speechless. She just couldn't make Ethel understand. And there was no use trying. She turned to Aunt Alice.

"You know, Aunt Alice, Mumsey told us to be sure to bring you back with us. We have only one more day. You're coming, aren't you?"

"I'm afraid not this time, dear. I have had rather a busy time of it, you see, and I will have

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to rest up before I can go visiting. But you can tell your dear grandmother that I am most anxious to see her, and I will come down before the summer is over. There come your friends. Run along and have a good time. I know I am going to be real lonely when you both leave me," she smiled, as each of the girls touched her cheek in parting.

"I'd like to have an Aunt Alice like her," remarked Ethel. "Isn't it queer I never hear anything from my real aunt?"

"The one with the big family?" asked Joan, for Ethel's adoption by Mrs. Burke had rather confused her list of relatives.

"Yes. Even though I did go among strangers you would think she'd write to me." There was a tone in Ethel's voice quite unusual for her. Joan smiled reassurance just as the Wallace girls came up from their little car, which Mabel drove and Maud occupied.

"I've got a letter for you, Joan," called out Maud, waving a slip of paper under the car curtain, "and you never in the world could guess whom it's from?"

"Whom?" demanded Joan, slipping in beside Maud, while Ethel took her place on the front seat beside Mabel.

"That queer frowsy-headed Carlos. He ran after us, asked would we see you this afternoon and thrust the letter into my helpless paw," replied Maud, passing the envelope on to Joan.

Joan turned it over critically. Somehow she hated to open it with Mabel's eyes upon her, for she felt it must contain something confidential, and she might have difficulty in not sharing it with the others.

"What's the news?" demanded Ethel promptly.

"Yes, let's hear the glad tidings," added cynical Mabel.

"Just for that now," teased Joan, "I may *not* tell you."

"Don't you do it," prompted Maud. "I'll bet it's a secret, for that youngster's face looked like a whole funeral. You can read it, Joan. I'll protect you. And if he wants money I've got a quarter left over from my missionary tax."

Joan was grateful to Maud, but still hesitated over reading the letter. She had one of those queer feelings sometimes called premonitions.

"Joan Marsh!" called back Ethel, as the car started off. "You're holding back something. Just you wait until I get a letter. Maybe I'll get one from our handsome soldier, Graham Philbrook," teased Ethel.

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"Wasn't he good looking?" chimed in Mabel. "I just adore that tawny hair."

"Tawny! Like our big dog at the Lee, Joan," chuckled Ethel. "Well, at any rate, he said he'd send me a card. So there now! I got ahead of the maid-of honor," she boasted.

By this time Joan was reading her note. It was, as might have been expected, a feeble scrawl, but there was no mistaking its intent. Carlos wanted to know if Joan would slip out at the back door of Lane's at seven o'clock that night to see him about something important. And he asked her to come alone.

Her first impulse was one of mirth—that Carlos should write such a message to her. But there seemed something pathetic in his evident effort to spell correctly, for a number of words had been revised, and the way he wrote, "please, please don't fail," seemed like a genuine appeal.

She folded the paper and slipped it back in the envelope. Maud's eyes were shifting politely to sights along the road, and Ethel was prattling away with Mabel, apparently quite oblivious of the letter or its possible contents.

Answering some trivial question from Maud, Joan indifferently turned her attention to the

girls, but her mind was fixed upon Carlos' message. What could he want? He had said he was going away? And even Margaret was interested in something about Carlos which carried a mysterious secrecy. Well, Joan would see him, of course, and if she could help him she would. That much was easy to settle.

The boy was one to compel interest. Remarkable looking, if not really handsome, his shock of black hair and his magnetic dark eyes proclaimed him of foreign extraction, while his easy, drawling American ways bespoke humble surroundings as his usual environment. All this Joan pondered. The girls might run in and out of stores, sip soda and prattle foolishly of the wedding's aftermath, but she could only join them abstractedly. She wondered what Carlos could want.

Ethel was in her glory with the Wallace girls. She apparently had quite forgotten Joan's letter, and when a group of boys sauntered along, swinging tennis rackets and assuming the summer-boy air to perfection, Ethel's cheeks flamed joyously. Maud and Mabel had been boasting of the "dandy boys" who came out to spend the summer in Hillsdale, and these were surely of that type.

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As the boys waved, Mabel drew her car up to the curb.

"We're just going to cool off at Clarke's," spoke a young man who wore glasses and fanned his sunburnt face with his racket. "Can't we induce you——"

"Just been there," sang out Maud. "And we've got to hurry along. Our friends——" There followed informal introductions and disjointed explanations. The boys seemed to all talk at once, while Maud and Mabel kept asking questions, giggling and uttering foolish little screams and squeals, quite amusing to Joan and Ethel.

"See you to-night?" asked the boy who was tall, blonde and apparently cultured.

"May-bee!" drawled Mabel.

"Oh, do come over," urged the youth, talking directly to Joan. "We're going to have a real dance to-night."

"Oh, I wonder if we can?" exclaimed Ethel, with such childish sincerity that every one laughed.

"Won't mamma let you?" teased the spectacled youth.

"Afraid of big, black, dark?" chimed in a very short, stout, puffy young man, apparently older than the others and advertising the fact by a very conspicuous display of his cigarette.

"Don't be—sill-lee!" lisped Maud. "Our friends are going home—"

"To-night!" (Chorus with tennis rackets accompaniment.)

"No, to-morrow——"

"Then they *must* come over to the dance. Chance of a lifetime, I assure you. Ahem!" and the stout one expanded his chest and puffed harder than ever at the unfortunate cigarette.

"We have a real party——"

"Can't promise," Mabel broke in. "And we've got to speed along now. Go get your sodas, you look as if you'd enjoy them——"

"If we had—ahem, pleasant company." The tall youth said this to Joan, and she felt her cheeks burn, as he kept his eyes upon her.

"I'm sorry," she managed to answer, and, as she did so, Joan Marsh felt more like a real country girl than she had ever before in her life.

As their car moved off Ethel joined the Wallace girls in waving, exclaiming, calling back and otherwise doing the meaningless things that girls will do when boys are watching them. But Joan only smiled tolerantly and wondered why she felt so painfully self-conscious.

"Swell boys!" declared Maud, as the car left the quartette behind. "I wish you could come——"

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"Oh, we couldn't possibly," broke in Joan, panic-stricken at the very idea of attending a summer dance. "You know we have many things to help Aunt Alice put away——"

"And we dance like kids," blurted out Ethel, apologizing for the expression with one of her heartiest laughs.

"Oh, Maud and I just adore dancing," boasted Mabel. "It's a shame you can't come. Those boys——" And there followed a detailed account of "the boys'" qualifications as desirable dance partners, not the least stressed being their "fathers' business" and their "mothers' social standing," although even the gullible Ethel wondered why such items counted in their dance degrees.

But none of this interested Joan. In fact she had difficulty in keeping her mind upon the prattle to the extent of making intelligent replies, for Carlos' note, crumpled in her hand, seemed to hold a foreboding of something more than a boy's whim.

The hour between found her poor company for Aunt Alice and Ethel, but the latter, at least, was having too good a time to pry into other's secrets. Ethel was often a better friend than even she, in her unfailing generosity to Joan, was con-

scious of being, and when she and Aunt Alice left the supper table and made for the phonograph in the farthest end of the long parlor, Joan knew the way was clear for her secret meeting with Carlos.

CHAPTER VI

CARLOS AND THE SHADOW

IT was a full hour past the time appointed, yet Carlos had not come. In the interval, Joan had slipped in and out of the house several times, making a point of selecting a new record for the phonograph each time to avert suspicion. In that way neither Aunt Alice nor Ethel was aware that she, Joan, was spending her time between the back door and the Norway maple tree.

When finally the unmistakable figure of the boy came silently through the little grove of rose trees, it was almost dark. He hurried up to Joan, touched her arm and sort of pulled her back into the shadow of the maple. As he did so she noticed a man pass along on the side-walk heading toward the driveway that led to the house. Here he stopped, as if looking for some one.

She easily guessed that Carlos was hiding from the man, and she stood there almost breathless as they listened. It was too dark to see from the road into the garden, but from the garden it was

easy to discern the figure in the open driveway. After a few moments, that seemed much longer because of their suspense, the man passed on, and Joan breathed audibly, a sigh of relief.

"What ever is the matter, Carlos?" she whispered. "I've been so anxious——"

"It's all right. I'm sorry I'm late," replied the lad, "but I had to dodge him."

"Who is he?"

"You wouldn't know. But I'll soon be rid of him. He's a loafer for one thing and a blamed nuisance for another."

"Why was he following you?"

"Money. I guess he can smell it. But I've got to talk fast——"

Something cracked in the hedge. Joan seized Carlos' hand.

"Do come inside, Carlos," she begged. "I'm too nervous to stay out here, and you know you can trust Aunt Alice and Ethel just as much as you can me."

"Oh, I know that——" Another sound of breaking underbrush. "Come along. He's not going to get this. But go easy. Can we get in the side door?"

"Yes," whispered Joan, moving along cautiously toward the house.

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Within doors Joan saw how frightened Carlos appeared. His eyes glared like black pools; even his curly hair seemed agitated and unruly, his browned hands kept busy fingers interlacing, and until Joan insisted that he sit down and "get quiet," his attitude had been one of constant shifting. Also, she noted, he was dressed up, ready for a journey.

Beasy, the maid, was, fortunately, out for the evening so that the kitchen provided secrecy.

"What ever is the matter?" again Joan asked. "Carlos, honestly, you look as if you had seen a—a ghost."

"Something like one," he stammered sullenly. "But I've got to hurry Miss, Miss Joany," he stammered. "You know I wrote you a letter?"

"Oh, yes, of course. That's why I was waiting for you. But can't I call Ethel? She'll be wondering."

"All right. I don't mind," and he gave his helpless cap another twist. "Only I've got to hurry up."

Joan disappeared through the pantry, and it is safe to guess that she quickly "crammed an explanation down Ethel's surprised throat," for she presently returned with Ethel, all but open-mouthed, leading up behind her.

Carlos kept watching the windows, as if expecting the dark figure from the roadway to thrust an ugly face against the pane.

"Dodging Sam?" asked Ethel in her direct way.

"No, not Sam." But Carlos didn't explain further. Instead he went on. "I've got to be quick. I came to see if you'd help me out by buying old Skip?"

"Buying Skip!" Joan exclaimed.

"Ye-ah. I've got the money—'most enough but it's like this. If I try to buy him Sam'll dicker, raise the price, or maybe say the money ain't mine. So I thought it up, to have you—you girls go after him."

Ethel was on the verge of an impolite titter but a look from Joan dispelled the inclination.

"What would we do with old Skip?" she asked instead.

"Oh, I didn't mean for you to keep him," stutted Carlos. "You see——" he paused. It seemed very hard for him to say much at a time. Boy-like, he talked in chunks. "I'll tell you," he again attempted. "You see, old Sam'll sell Skip to the bone-yard for ten dollars. I heard him say so, and I couldn't leave him to that." His voice was brave but betrayed an effort. "You

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don't know how good-natured old Skip is," he continued. "Just like a dog. Ever have a dog?"

"One at school," replied Ethel. "You know, Joan, Shaggy."

"Yes, I understand, Carlos," said Joan, showing some anxiety for haste herself. "You couldn't bear to have Skip go to—to the fertilizer factory," she hazarded.

"That's just it," answered Carlos, grateful for the help. "I've been saving a long time to buy him." He thrust his hand into his pocket and drew out an old purse. "I've got almost enough. Sam said ten dollars and I only got eight. I tried to borrow the other two to-night—that's what kept me late. Then this sneaking beggar——"

"Don't you worry about the other two dollars, Carlos," interrupted Joan. "We'll be glad to chip in, and we'll buy old Skip, of course. But what did you want us to do with him?"

"You see, it's this way. I'm goin' away. I can't stay no place when *he* finds out——"

"Who?" demanded Ethel.

"I can't just tell," stammered Carlos. "You believe in a promise, don't you?"

"In keeping a promise? If it's a good one, but not if it isn't," answered Ethel promptly.

"But we don't want you to break one for us,"

declared Joan. "We know, whoever that man is who was following you to-night is—an enemy."

"Worse than that. He's a—he's—a——" But words failed the indignant boy. His dark eyes seemed deeper pools than ever, and as he now stood waiting for Joan to take the bills he was offering, Ethel didn't think him quite so skinny and awkward as she had once declared him to be. In fact Carlos, with coat and shoes on, was a rather good-looking boy.

"Can you tell us where you are going?" Ethel had not the advantage of his confidence previously given to Joan.

"Not exactly," he replied. "But I'll come for Skip, soon as I can. I thought maybe you could take him down your way. He's awfully easy to drive."

This was too much for Ethel's sense of humor. She could just see herself and Joan, driving home to Roamwood behind the old saw-bones Skip, and she burst out laughing at the idea.

"Maybe you think I couldn't drive him?" Joan patched up the situation. "But don't you worry, Carlos. We'll not let the pound-master get your horse. I'm sure Aunt Alice will let us keep him, somewhere, and——" She stopped. There seemed no way of making any practical arrange-

ments for the old horse. Joan Marsh was puzzled, and even her anxiety to help poor Carlos just now offered no feasible plans for Skip.

"He wouldn't ask nothin' better than to nose around out in that back field," suggested Carlos.

"Oh, we know he likes nosing, all right," broke in Ethel. "Didn't you hear him sneeze in through the bushes at the wedding?"

"Ethel Burke! You stop," ordered Joan. "This is—serious. Go ahead, Carlos. Tell us just what to do."

"Well, go over to Sam in the morning and tell him you want to buy Skip. Maybe it would be a good idea to say you want to fatten him up——"

"For a saddle horse!" Horrid Ethel.

Joan looked her contempt. Carlos smiled, wanly, but the next moment a small noise outside caused him to start nervously.

"Don't mind her, Carlos," begged Joan. "Ethel is always joking. Go on. You were telling us what to say to Sam."

"Well, he's cranky, you know. You've got to—to kinda jolly him." The boy grinned but there was no smile in the effort. It was plain that Carlos was very much worried about something.

"Maybe Sam won't want to sell him to us," suggested Ethel.

"Oh, he won't keep a horse himself. He wouldn't ever give the creature a bucket of water," declared Carlos, "let alone food. And let me tell you something you can always tell old Skip by," the boy diverted brightly. "He's got brown hairs on his fetlocks."

"Fetlocks!" exclaimed both girls.

"Ye-ah. You know, them whiskers on his heels."

A shout of laughter greeted this explanation, but presently Joan recovered her dignity enough to ask:

"You mean those long hairs over his hoofs? Of course I know. And that's a good identification mark, where no one would look for it," she added wisely.

"That's it. That's why I'm telling you. He has streaks of brown hair in there—just looks dirty now, of course, but wouldn't ever wash out white like the rest of him."

"That's all right, Carlos," chimed in Ethel, "but I'm sure I could tell Skip's sneeze among a drove of wild horses. He has a pure baritone voice. Couldn't ever fool me on that."

It was difficult for the young folks to get back again to the serious matter in hand, but finally Ethel asked:

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"What's your other name, Carlos?"

"My name? Oh, I've got a couple. Sometimes one is handy and sometimes another. Out here I'm Carlos Torrell."

"Torrell?" repeated Joan. "Is that Italian?"

"It used to be when it was Torrello, but Torrell is all right," replied the boy, "and is handier. Then, you'll get Skip, sure thing in the morning?" he urged, moving toward the door.

"We'll try to," Joan agreed. "But are you going away to-night? You can't, surely!"

"I'm going—that is, I won't be around Kanes' any more. I'll stay with a friend until morning. You see—oh, darn it, I always have to skip out like this when that shadow finds me," he ended. He could not hide the discouragement his own simple statement conveyed. He was indignant, angry, but determined.

"Who's the shadow?" Ethel asked. This time she managed to show a little serious sympathy.

"That's his promise," cautioned Joan. "We can't ask him to tell us things that are his secrets."

Carlos' dark eyes thanked Joan. He untwisted his cap as if preparing to don it.

"If I hadn't promised a woman——"

"Your mother?" Joan ventured.

"Nope. Nothing to me, but a good friend. And you see, there's another fellow in it. And I would never take a chance on bringing more trouble to him." And at the thought his face seemed illumined with a boyish love for the "fellow" he referred to.

"That's right, Carlos," Ethel declared. "You stick to your friends and you'll never need one yourself. I'll bet you'll never need a ride but you'll see an old horse hobbling up to you. On account of your kindness to poor old Skip." Ethel's doctrines were homely but sound.

"What a shame!" she continued sympathetically. "If you could trust us and tell us just enough so as we would understand," she pressed. "I'm sure we could help you."

The boy kicked his shabby shoes together in that embarrassed, helpless way, and sighed, although being a boy the sigh was more a shake of the head than an audible murmur.

"Tough!" he said in an undertone. "But you see—you see, it's the kid. He's some kid, and I'm bound to protect him."

"Seems to me," said Joan, "you are having your hands full. Looking out for poor old Skip and protecting—the boy. But just don't you worry, Carlos. We'll do all we can, and when

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my Uncle Roger comes back I'm going to get him to help. He's been in the World War and he knows most everything. I'm sure he could scare that fellow off so that he would be afraid to follow you ever again. It's a shame. And I suppose he takes your hard earned money."

"Oh, yes," groaned the boy. "But that's the only way I can get rid of him. And keep him quiet," Carlos added sullenly.

"Sounds to me like blackmail," broke out Ethel, "and that's against the law."

"Law! A lot he cares for law." The boy's voice was raised in indignation. "I'd turn him over in a minute—only for the kid." He stopped talking and the girls respected his sullen silence.

Joan knew Aunt Alice would be wondering about their long secret conference, but she feared to frighten Carlos off if she should open the door between the kitchen and the dining-room. Aunt Alice was, Joan knew, sitting just beyond the dining-room under the library reading lamp.

"I'll have to beat it," said Carlos finally, "and I'll let you know, soon as I can. Give me your other address, and don't forget to tell Libby I'm sorry I couldn't say good-by."

Ethel wrote down the Roamwood address on

one of the wedding cards that Beasy had mounted atop the coffee grinder.

"Somehow, I don't feel I ought to take this money," Joan argued. "I'll tell you what I'll do. Here's five dollars, you have got to keep that." She pressed it into his unwilling hand. "And when you come to get Skip and want to sell him to some decent owner, you can pay us back if you wish. You see, we are going to give up everything this summer for a—certain purpose"—she did not want to mention the plans for Brackin Lee—"and——"

"Oh, I'll tell you!" exclaimed Ethel. "Maybe we could use Skip in our—business. Joan, let's buy him! I've got some money and you've got some, and—and why not?"

"He's an all right old horse for deliveries if you're going in business," Carlos contended. "But he's so thin—I didn't mean to ask any one to buy him, as he is."

"I think that's a good idea, Ethel," Joan agreed eagerly, "and I guess we're as good fatteners as any one else. Yes, we'll take Skip off your hands, Carlos. Here's your money. Look out for it. And we'll go over to Kaness' first thing in the morning. Here's Aunt Alice. Now you

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can say good-by to her too." The plan to buy Skip outright had plainly brought relief to Joan.

But there was something very desolate in the farewells. Aunt Alice was concerned that the boy should go away secretly, but young as he was, he showed experience with an unrelenting world, and when his dark eyes threw their last grateful look over his shoulder as he faced the night outside, the trio watching him knew that Carlos Torrell was brave and loyal to the promise that was bringing hardship upon himself.

"Now we're in for it," commented Ethel drolly, as the door closed upon Carlos. "Joan, I wouldn't wonder but we'll be running a circus instead of a tea-room this summer. Skip would be wonderful with you prancing through a hoop on his fluted back."

CHAPTER VII

FRUSTRATED

AUNT ALICE answered the phone. Her replies to the party on the other end of the line surprised Joan and Ethel. When she turned back to them, having shut off the connection she looked somewhat surprised herself.

"John, the man who lives in the cottage at the rear and takes care of the grounds, you know," she explained, "is coming over. He saw a strange man——"

"He's the one who followed Carlos," Ethel interrupted.

"Well, on account of the wedding presents, you know," Aunt Alice continued, "John thought he had best stay with us until Beasy comes in. It's early, and there's no danger, but——"

"Beasy's as good as any policeman," suggested Joan. "I don't wonder you have such confidence in her, Aunt Alice."

"She is, indeed. Let's turn on the back porch

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light: John will be along directly. Just touch the white button, Ethel, please." Aunt Alice was too calm to be natural; she was hiding her anxiety.

"Listen!" exclaimed Joan.

Men were talking outside. John's voice, with his soft English accent, was easy to locate, but the other was in a deep, guttural growl, and none of its words were intelligible.

"That's Carlos' shadow!" whispered Ethel. "I'm glad John came up. Let's go in the library."

"Wants to know about a boy," John announced, "but I guess he wanted to know about some other things——" He checked himself as he looked at the girls. It would be unwise to talk of wedding presents and prowlers in their presence.

"But there has been a boy here. What sort of person was this man, John?" asked Aunt Alice.

"A sneaking loafer, I'd say, Miss Alice. Wouldn't so much as let one get a look at his face—not that it would be worth looking at, likely," John qualified. He was going from door to windows, quietly trying bolts and locks. "What about the boy, Miss Alice?" he asked. "This fellow talked threatening-like about 'his brudder.' I mis-doubt he was just making up a

yarn. The woods are growing loafers instead of huckleberries these days," and he chuckled lightly at his wit.

"I hope he doesn't find Carlos," Joan said aside. "That poor boy acted like one——"

"Hounded," joined in Ethel. "John, I wish you kept that fellow and called the police. Have you got police out here?"

"Well, we've got a couple of badges that's being sported around, but I'm not sure the fellows wearing them are, strictly speaking, police. Yet, in a tight pinch I guess they might answer, at that. Here's Beasy now. She's the whole police force around this end of town," John averred.

The door opened and a much flustered Beasy confronted them.

"What ever is the matter!" exclaimed Aunt Alice.

"Matter!" And the big woman brushed down her disarranged gingham sleeves. "Did you see an old tramp around here?"

"We sure did," replied John. "And I guess he was the same fellow *you* saw."

"Well, it's a good thing Beasy Walsh had her two arms free," declared the woman, dropping into a chair while those around her waited eagerly for her story. "That old tramp was chasing a

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boy—the Carlos boy who was here at the wedding; I knew his curly head,” she insisted, “and I knew his voice too, calling after the loafer as he ran.”

“Did he catch him?” demanded Joan anxiously.

“He did not. I saw what was doing and Sarah Townsend was along with me. Well, we just nicely stepped behind Mrs. Webber’s hedge, at the back gate, you know, a fine, stout clothes pole in my hand, and as he puffed along—he was too fat to run like the boy—well,” (Beasy paused effectively) “we just worked the little clothes pole like the old railroad gates and Mr. Tramp just kissed the gravel, nice as you please.” Then having said a good thing she stopped, short.

“What a clever trick! How did you hold him?” asked Joan, beaming upon the heroine.

“He was so mad he just stood there chinnin’ in his queer guff until the boy he was after got on a trolley, and by now, I guess, he’s too far away for the big duffer to even know which way he went. The loafer! To try to take that poor boy’s money from him! You ought to hear Sarah give him a piece of her mind, and a piece of the clothes pole too.” Beasy was proud of her victory, and John, man that he was, admitted that two strong girls and a clothes pole are equal to

any one fellow, even a pretty good "scrapper" at that.

"But are you sure the man has left—around here?" asked Aunt Alice.

"Sure, Miss Alice. He took a car going the other way. They were passing each other at the switch and he jumped on the one bound for Tiv-erly. The boy was headed the other way—going lickity-split into Clarion, so I guess there's not much chance of them meeting up again this time. Now, I wonder what the row was about, anyhow?"

Joan told quickly all she knew of Carlos' troubles, John added his contribution to the recital, and Ethel filled in with so many guesses and suggestions that the conclusion was decidedly in her favor.

"I'll tell you exactly what it is," she said positively, although she was still guessing and "making up" so fanciful and exciting a story, that even Beasy shook her head in doubt. "I'll tell you," she repeated impressively. "That fellow is no relation to Carlos and he's just chasing him up to get every cent the boy earns. Maybe the other boy, the little boy that Carlos called the kid, has been kidnaped and is being held for ransom——"

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"Ethel Burke!" Joan cried. "I thought you had been cured of all that sort of stuff. Why don't you say that Carlos has escaped from a robber's band in a black cave——"

"Well, the way he ran," put in Beasy, "I'd say he would keep his escape in good working order. I never did see a pair of legs fly as his did; even in the dark you couldn't miss them."

"I guess you're all right now," said John, securing his hat from a corner chair. "I'll be going along. No danger of the bandit coming back. But I'd like to lay hold of him and find out why he can scare off a decent lad like Carlos. How some humans can live by picking the bones of poor youngsters——" John's indignation left him choking on the "good-night" he was proffering to those present.

When the lights were out and the girls tried to sleep, Joan spoke once more, declaring it would be her very last word.

She said: "Ethel, you know all we have planned for the summer. The garden, the tea-room, the lawn parties."

"Ye-ah," yawned Ethel.

"And we only came out here to the wedding just to—to come to the wedding," limped Joan, too tired to make a better selection of words.

"Yes, of course. We came to the wedding and we're going back home to-morrow. Don't forget that detail, Joany. And maybe a little sleep would help," murmured Ethel.

"I know, Ethy, and I'm just dog-tired too," moaned Joan. "But I can't help feeling we have come upon an adventure—a mysterious one," she added seriously. "Ever since we landed in Kanes' tangled lane, and ever since Carlos came to our rescue and drove us back in the old farm wagon——"

"And ever since old Skip sneezed and nearly broke up the wedding ceremony; don't forget to put that on your catalogue of clews," yawned Ethel, turning over so noisily that the bed's springs sprang a back-fire.

"All right, Ethel, but just remember what I say. Carlos is a good boy. He is, somehow, in dread of that horrible man and is running away from him. I'm so sorry we didn't get any idea where he intended to go."

"I asked him."

"But he avoided answering."

"He'll come back to get Skip," promised Ethel. "Just you wait and see. No boy ever leaves a dog or a horse when he loves him like that. But——" and Ethel vaulted over to the other

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side giving the bed springs another chance to react. "I'll tell you another thing, Joany Marsh, Red-head, we are going to have some fun handling skippity-hop to the barber-shop. He's not going baggage on *my* ticket——"

"Do be serious, Ethel. I can't see how you can joke so after—after our experience to-night," murmured Joan, with a long drawn and deeply significant sigh.

"No bones broken," drawled Ethel.

"But don't you think, Ethy, really, it was fine of Carlos to take the other little boy's part?"

"And I think it's fine of you, Joany, to take Carlos' part. But then—you always were romantic. Isn't it Tillie who says 'Happenings will follow those who—are nosey'?"

"Something like that," agreed Joan, sullenly. "Just the same, Ethel, we are in for it with Skip and Carlos. After that—who knows but we may unearth a very interesting story?"

"There—you—go! Just as you did out at the Lee when you set out to marry Margaret to her war hero," declared Ethel. "And you did it too. Well, Joany, I'll stand by you if you find me some interesting hero!"

"There's Carlos——"

"Too skinny, too dark, and I don't like his

accent," fired back Ethel, jokingly. "Now, let's get to sleep and no fooling," she urged. "I hate to look drowsy when I'm traveling."

That finished the argument, although it is safe to guess that even Ethel might have dreamed of their next day's efforts to obtain possession of Skip.

Aunt Alice wouldn't hear of letting the girls go out to Kanes' without her, when the time arrived next morning for the important undertaking.

"But you won't like it a bit, Auntie," protested Joan. "It's just horrid, dirty and everything."

"All the more reason why I can't let you go alone," replied Aunt Alice. "John will drive us. The car hasn't been out enough lately, and I don't want the motor to run down from lack of use, you know."

There was no time for discussion, as the girls were to leave for home on the afternoon train and were all packed and ready now. Ethel still enjoyed joking about old Skip.

"I'll bring strings to bind my petticoats—case I have to ride him in," she said aside to Joan. "The more I think of him the more wonderful I am sure our circus is going to be. And we mustn't forget to train his hoof-whiskers into pretty bobs, the way Carlos said."

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"Hoof-whiskers! Why can't you say fetlocks?" scolded Joan. She wasn't exactly in a mood for foolish jokes.

"Oh, all right, certainly, just as you say, I don't mind," rambled Ethel. "But for goodness' sake, hurry up or John will have to turn the motor over again, and all men hate to crank a car," rejoined Ethel.

It was a warm day and the ride in the open touring car through the small town with its pretty winding roadways was pleasant indeed. The girls made good use of their opportunity to express to Aunt Alice their appreciation for her hospitality, and she, in turn, was generous in her declarations that to her, also, their visit had meant much pleasure.

"And I've been talking the matter over with John," she said, "about the old horse; you know. He thinks he can take care of him——"

"Easiest thing in the world," said John, overhearing. "My old barn is just groaning for a tenant."

"Oh, that will be splendid," exclaimed Joan, with unfeigned relief. "I had been wondering——"

"And I had been planning to ride the creature

in the suburban handicap," said Ethel gayly. "Well, my hopes are rudely dashed."

"There's the lane, John; by that stumpy old tree," pointed out Joan. "We had better walk in; it's so rough."

Leaving the car under a tree they started for the old homestead. Aunt Alice remarked upon the run-down condition of the whole place, but expressed the opinion that Libby Kane and her brother Sam were the victims of a narrow life.

"They kept too much to themselves," she remarked, "and that's a bad thing for any one, especially those who are naturally situated apart from the business world. If they had not inherited this place, they would have had to work; and then they would have made some friends even in business," she argued.

The girls did not reply, for the vine-smothered porch was too close to make safe further personal criticism.

CHAPTER VIII

ELUSIVE OLD SKIP

WHATEVER trouble the girls had anticipated with old Sam Kane, that which they encountered was not it. It was well that John was along with them, and also a good thing that Aunt Alice had insisted upon going.

Sam Kane was furious, and he made no attempt to hide it. Skip was gone—stolen, he declared, by “that young hoodlum, Carlos.”

“And I’ll have the law on him,” thundered the irate old man. “Haven’t I fed him and paid him, and sheltered him.”

“Sam Kane,” interrupted the invalid sister, from the rag-bundled cushions in the old rocker at the side of the porch, “I’d like to know what call *you* had to the horse, anyway? Didn’t Carlos find him wandering about the fields? Didn’t he try every way to trace the owner? And then, finally, didn’t you agree to keep him for the work he did?”

“Hum,” grunted the man, scowling at his sister for giving this recital before the strangers,

"and do you think that bag-of-bones could do enough work for his keep?"

"Then, what do you want him for?" demanded John. "You're well rid of him if he wasn't worth his keep."

"But that ain't it," fired back the older man. "It's the principle of the thing. To think a boy would bite the hand that fed him! Steal the horse out of my barn and run off with him!"

"But, Mr. Kane," put in Joan, a little timidly, "I don't believe he did take him, because he gave us the money to buy him from you. He wanted Skip and he said—he understood," stammered the girl, "that you would sell him for ten dollars. He had most of the money——"

"He did, eh? Where'd he get it, I like to know?"

"Why, he earned it, of course," put in John, who undertook to handle the case for the more timid ones. "Didn't you pay him anything? Doesn't the state *make* you pay an orphan boy for his work?"

"More'n he was worth. And last night I held back a little for a hoe he busted——"

"Yes, you did, Sam," put in the sister. "You held back a dollar and a half, and the hoe cost a dollar and a quarter——"

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"Oh, shet up," exclaimed Sam, irritably. "A lot of women folks allus cacklin' around——"

At this point Aunt Alice felt called upon to make a speech. She had been talking quietly to Libby Kane whom she had known in the woman's better days, but now she addressed herself directly to Sam Kane.

"That boy did not take the horse, Sam Kane," she said sharply, "for he was at our house early in the evening, and my maid saw him get on a car. He certainly was not riding a horse. We came here to buy the animal——"

"Mebbe the former owner is after him——" sneered Sam. "I allus knew he was a furst rate old nag, not so old either, but run down. Well," and he chewed his tobacco insolently, "he's gone now, but if I lay eyes on him I'll claim him for his keep. And what's more, I'll turn that smart young rascal back to them as best knows how to manage him."

"Sam Kane! You hush!" ordered his sister. "If ever you let that loafer who hounds him, whatever he is to Carlos, lay hands on that poor boy again I'll—I'll——" She was choking with anger and it was a few moments before she continued. "I'll leave this place and sell the place over your head. I have some rights here and Car-

los Torrell was a good friend to me. He nursed me through a sickness this spring, when you, Sam, hadn't time to get me a drink of fresh water."

"Oh, you wimmin folks, allus whining," snarled Sam, feeling pretty much outweighed in his foolish arguments. "But I know my business——"

"All right, Sam," said John briskly. "We'll be going along. But just let me warn you. Keep your hands off Carlos Torrell"—he was very emphatic in the order—"and don't put another man's horse into your shanty without advertising him first. He might belong to a man who had his own ideas about a little thing like that."

"Coming, Aunt Alice?" Joan asked. Ethel had already walked a considerable distance down the lane.

"Yes, dear. Just a minute. Libby is telling me——"

Sam and John were talking none too pleasantly as they sauntered off, and whatever Libby was telling Aunt Alice it seemed very important indeed, for the sickly woman was almost whispering into Aunt Alice's ear.

Joan waited nervously, wondering what could have become of poor old Skip, and wondering still more seriously, how Carlos would take the news

of his loss—when the news would finally reach him.

"I'll come to see you again, Libby," Aunt Alice promised in parting. "You see, I'm losing my two visitors this afternoon, and we must be hurrying along."

"Don't let on to him"—indicating Sam—"what I told you," said the old woman. "He's got no ears for such things, but Carlos was awful good to me and I'd like to see him done right by. He's been put upon—by that other," continued the woman, as if talking to herself, "and he's a good honest boy. I tell you *I'll* miss him."

Aunt Alice left as Libby Kane mumbled on, but before she entered the auto she turned around to wave good-by, Ethel and Joan joining in the leave-taking.

"I can't believe it," gasped Joan quickly, as they were seated. "I don't believe Skip was stolen."

"He's gone," declared John, preparing to start the car. "But I'll tell you what I think. That horse is a roamer. He has intelligence and when he missed Carlos this morning he started out to look for him."

"How could he know?" pressed Joan.

"Hunger. I suppose Carlos never missed feed-

ing him at a certain minute. But don't you worry, little girls," (John was a privileged care-taker on Aunt Alice's place). "If he rambles around these parts I'll hear of it, and I'll fetch him back." He started his car and left the girls discussing the situation with Aunt Alice.

"Don't worry, Joan," Ethel spoke first. "John can do more than we could do, and when Skip comes back——"

"I'll have John fetch him down for you, if your grandma finds a place to keep him," offered Aunt Alice.

Joan smiled through a serious face. She had had her heart set on reclaiming poor old Skip, and now that he was gone she felt a sense of personal loss.

"Perhaps if we had gone earlier we might have found him," she faltered. "I'm afraid Carlos will think we didn't carry out our promise very well."

"And when, pray, do you expect to see friend Carlos again?" asked Ethel. "He's just a poor boy who has to work on farms, and while I think he's fine, and honorable, and really high-principled," she took the trouble to assert, "still, he must have a lot of trouble to support himself——"

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"And keep clear of the man who follows him up," concluded Joan, bitterly.

Aunt Alice glanced over at the girl whose red-gold curls were teasing her eyes as they always did when she was bothered. The soft green voile dress gave Joan's peach-blow complexion deeper floral tints, and even Ethel in her blooming pink dress, with a big leghorn hat and dangling wild roses, could scarcely be called a truer summer girl than Joan. In fact they made a most attractive pair, and could the less fortunate ones of Brackin Lee have had an opportunity of observing them, it is safe to guess they would have added more compliments to those already recorded among loved ones at the Lee.

Back again for lunch with Aunt Alice, the girls finished the few last minute details, always necessary just before leaving on a trip, and then with endless requests for both John and Beasy to keep a look-out for Skip and to let them know, first thing, as soon as even a suspicion of his discovery was unearthed, they were finally at the station. There was no time to spare, and presently they were waving to Aunt Alice as their train ponderously snorted off.

There was now no novelty to their trip—it was

merely a matter of going home with impatience to get there. As usual, Ethel bubbled over with all sorts of joyous possibilities for their arrival. She declared she felt as if she had been away a month, and she just couldn't wait to see her Mother Burke.

Joan was still gloomy, and sighed often. She admitted it would be lonely for a while without Margaret and Roger, but hoped the work of fixing up for the tea-room would fill in the vacancy.

It was directly after a little sentimental speech, that included this admission from Joan, that Ethel slammed her magazine down and laid firm hold of her companion's hand.

"Joan," she said tragically, "I suppose you think me horrid to—to forget all my own folks!"

"Why, Ethel!"

"I know you do and I don't blame you. I just took the first chance I got to get away from the Lee, and that dear Mother Burke turned out to be so good to me was no credit of mine." Joan was watching her in wonderment. This was a new, a different Ethel.

"But I do think of them, just the same," Ethel continued. "And even if my aunt did have too many others to count *me* in, she did all she could

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and—and—I'm going to write her as soon as I get back. I know she went away West. She came out to bid me good-by."

Joan almost gasped. She was thunderstruck at the change in Ethel's manner. That any such serious thoughts should have been harbored in the seemingly frivolous head was, indeed, surprising.

Tears were actually swimming in Ethel's eyes, and although she looked out of the car window she only saw a flying ocean. Joan pressed her hand tenderly. Skip and all of Carlos' troubles were instantly put aside in her anxiety for Ethel.

"But, Ethy," she said, very gently, "you're not home-sick at Mrs. Burke's——"

"Oh, no," quickly came denial. "It isn't that. It's because I have been so—so—such a turn-coat," declared Ethel, "turning from my own folks——"

"But they wanted you to—to go to another home."

"Oh, yes. But your grandmother wanted *you* to, and you wouldn't do it."

"Now, Ethy, don't be so tragic. I'm sure your aunt must be delighted——"

"Poor Aunt! She had such a house full of children. Why, Joan, they were the dearest little

things, and there were two I hardly ever saw."

"But that wasn't your fault——"

"I guess you would have managed to see them, Joan," insisted Ethel. "You would have adored those babies. They were like—like little fat Kewpies." Dismay enveloped Ethel. She was as drooped as a withered flower, even her pretty rose-voile dress seeming to crumple from lack of appreciation. Her peculiarly wide-set brown eyes, of late so much improved because of her sudden character development, now stared straight ahead, seeing nothing but regret in their swept path.

As with most butterfly spirits a small pin prick of real sentiment was working tragic havoc, and Ethel felt at the moment a wild desire to give up all her new comfort and happiness at the home of the good woman who had legally adopted her, just to find her own relatives, and to be as real and as unpretentious as was Joan.

"I was silly," she said miserably. "I could have kept track of my folks even if I did go—to—to Mother Burke."

"Ethel, you are just being sad on account of Carlos," Joan suggested. "I feel that way, too. I guess everybody is bound to be sentimental once in a while."

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"Maybe." Ethel sighed again and pressed the cover down on the chocolate box. "But I have been fighting this off for a long time, Joan," she continued, "and just as soon as I get home I'm going to tell—Mother."

"I would, Ethy. It will be better not to have any secrets."

"Of course, I wouldn't—couldn't have done it if I had a mother to remember; but you see, Joan, I always felt so in my aunt's way. I was glad when I went to Brackin Lee and when my baby brother——"

A flood of tears welled over the rim of her eyes. They trickled, then flowed in two little streams down her face before she could check them. Joan just pressed her own hand over that one nearest her, and did not attempt to speak.

Finally Ethel choked back the tears and said brokenly:

"A little baby brother that mother loved and—died for. I was so stupid——"

"Ethel," spoke up Joan sharply, "we can't any of us be blamed for chances we didn't have. Your poor mother was probably ill——"

"I guess so. I always lived with my aunt until I went to the Lee."

"Then how could you have—loved or even known the baby brother?"

"It is rather sad to have been such a knock-about," sighed Ethel, her bitterness melting a little in her natural rejection of things too serious. "But now, somehow——"

"You are thinking of the baby brother because you are all keyed up over Carlos' story. I know," insisted Joan, sagely. "I get just like that. One thing throws me into a fit about another——"

"Yes, you're right, Joany. Ever since I saw frowsy Carlos so willing to give up his precious dollars to save some youngster from something, I've been conscience-stricken about—mother's baby."

"I'm sure Mrs. Burke is generous—I know she is kind," reasoned Joan. "So perhaps, Ethy, this is an inspiration."

"Let's hope so." Ethel patted her surprised cheeks, then turned to look out the window as the train slowed down. She jerked about suddenly and grabbed Joan's hand. "Look!" she exclaimed, excitedly. "A horse! Just like Skip! Joan, look!"

Two faces pressed close to the window. The outline of a horse could be plainly seen upon the road beyond the tracks.

CHAPTER IX

THE RIDERLESS HORSE

THE train was slowing almost to a stop, as both girls watched eagerly, close to the window and saw, on a road running parallel to the track, a riderless horse, a murky white horse, a very, thin, comic-looking horse.

"Skip!" both girls exclaimed, in astonishment.

"Oh, how can we get him?" breathed Joan.

"We can't," replied Ethel crisply.

"But how could he have wandered so far?"

"The railroad is much longer, you know. He was probably wise enough to take the short shady cut. Joan, could we get off——"

A sudden grinding of brakes and sissing of steam warned of the train's gathering speed.

"Oh, we're going," moaned Joan. "Perhaps the brakeman would take a telegram——"

"To whom? To Skip?" Ethel was ready to laugh now, but Joan was in no humor for joking. She was so excited she seemed to have forgotten that others were noticing her.

"He'll have to stop somewhere," she insisted, peering wildly out of the window as if Skip must turn his head her way.

"Oh, yes; likely he'll stop for lunch," teased Ethel, glibly.

"Now, you know very well what I mean," retorted Joan. "This can't be far from a station. I'm going to ask."

"It's too silly, Joan," warned Ethel. "He'll laugh at you. Don't do it, Joan," she begged.

But Joan was willing to take that chance, and so brushed aside Ethel's detaining hand. She leaned out into the aisle to intercept the trainman as he passed along.

"Are we near a station?" she asked casually.

The trainman looked at his watch although it would have seemed wiser to have looked out of the window.

"Ten minutes," he replied laconically, and Ethel laughed a little at the joke. Ten minutes *near* a station?

"I mean"—Joan had to raise her voice to prevent his escape—"I mean, are we near enough to a station to send a telegram?"

"Oh, that's it." He smiled, friendly now. "I'll take a message for you," he offered readily.

"Well, you see," stammered Joan, feeling her

face burn like nettle-rash, "we lost a horse, that is, a friend of ours has lost one——"

"Want to put up a lost sign somewhere?"

Ethel was poking poor Joan in her defenseless ribs. It was hard enough to think what to say but that distraction made Joan wince.

"Look," she said, desperately, "you can just see a horse on that road." She made room for the uniformed man, by pushing Ethel aside. "Do you see—him?"

"Something—like a horse," conceded the amused guard recovering his balance in the aisle.

"We think he's the one, and we are so anxious to get him," insisted Joan. "Could I wire some one around the next station to look out for him?"

"Well now." The trainman looked slyly at Ethel, then, as if in defiance to her smoldering mirth, he quickly agreed with Joan. "I guess we could," he said hopefully. "I'll fix it for you. Just give me a line of address so that the agent can notify you if they get the horse." He was looking out the next seat window now and apparently could still discern "what looked like a horse" jogging along on the distant road.

Joan was fairly trembling with excitement as she wrote her name and address on one of her grandmother's cards. She handed it to the smil-

ing man and tried to get some change from her purse, but he shook his head and hurried on to the front of the car.

"Of all the crazy things to do," murmured Ethel.

"Why? What's crazy about it?" demanded Joan sharply.

"We don't even know whether that's Skip or not," objected Ethel.

"But we can find out. If I didn't do that we'd never know." Joan felt so flustered and upset she had not noticed the conductor coming for tickets. But hers was produced before Ethel's had been punched, and for some time after Joan kept looking back over the flying roads, where, perhaps Skip was trudging, hungry, tired, and lonely for Carlos. Her imagination followed the old horse and his hardships with unpleasant certainty.

"I've seen dogs do that but never a horse," she remarked to Ethel, sighing sentimentally.

"You mean run after a car? That horse doesn't know there's a railroad track within miles of him," said Ethel indifferently. "Besides, there are lots of skinny old white nags besides Skip."

"You just want to pick, Ethy," pouted Joan. "You know very well what I mean."

"I don't, honestly, Joan, and I'm not picking. I was just thinking. Suppose that is Skip and some country station agent catches him. We'll likely have to pay storage——"

"Storage!" It was now Joan's turn to scoff.

"Oh, they charge storage for every little thing they do around railroads," flung back Ethel defiantly. "And if they tie him up to a post at the back of a station they'll be sure to charge for the use of the post."

Joan smiled in recovered good humor. Ethel was evidently forgetting the gloom which had so overwhelmed her as they began their trip. The train was making fast time, rolling up and down grades, whistling for crossings, and plunging on at seemingly limitless speed, as the fast express eats up distance and threatens every terrified thing in its path.

There is a fascination about speed, and even a lost horse can be momentarily forgotten in the enjoyment of it.

"We'll be home soon," Joan remarked, picking up papers and the discarded candy box to make ready.

"Yes; I hope mother meets us with the car," answered Ethel, quite grandly.

"If not, we can always get the hack!" Joan reminded her. A personal car was not yet a necessity according to Joan.

"But our car is so much more comfortable——"

"Spoiled child!" laughed Joan. "But since I haven't a car I do hope I'll recover Skip. I think I could train him nicely to a—depot cart."

"There's your man—the trainman," whispered Ethel. "Maybe he's got Skip trailing—behind——"

The guard, advancing through the aisle, was smiling broadly. He swerved toward Joan and remarked: "It's all right. I dropped it off."

"Oh, thank you so much," replied Joan, conscious of Ethel's silent criticism of the banal phrase. "I hope we hear from it."

"Yes, so do *I*," chimed in the guard, with a strong accent upon the personal pronoun.

"Could I let you know?" Joan was further risking Ethel's opinion in that question.

"Why—yes." He took from his pocket a time table, scribbled a line in pencil upon it and handed it to Joan.

"Quite an idea to head off a wandering horse this way," he remarked. "I like horses myself.

Hope you get him back all right," and with a very polite "tip of his cap" he passed along.

"I like that," drawled Ethel, her tone contradicting her words.

"What?"

"Some folks would call it flirting."

"Ethel—Burke!"

"Joan—Marsh! Don't let your red curls catch fire from your cheeks. You know very well I'm only teasing. He's a nice-looking guard——"

Joan's head was turned so far away from her companion that the train noise drowned Ethel's voice. But a tug at the soft little sleeve brought better results.

"I don't care, Ethel. That was mean. I certainly had to thank him." Joan's voice bore every trace of peevishness.

"Of course you did. Seems to me we are very touchy to-day," soothed Ethel, patting Joan's hand affectionately. "But then—look at all we've been through."

"Yes," sighed Joan, putting the trainman's written line inside the pocket of her hand-bag.

"But we are almost home——"

"Joan—about my folks," Ethel said, anxiously. "Don't forget I am going to hunt for them. And you'll help me?"

"You know I will, Ethy. I'd do most anything to help you, and I'm sure Mrs. Burke will be only too glad to see that you are—growing up."

"Growing up?"

"Of course. You're just getting sense," explained Joan, sagely. "You have been like a tom-boy before. And you know it's natural for some folks to keep childish lots later than others."

"Joan!" There was rebuke in the word. "Do you mean to say I'm more 'kiddish' than other girls?"

"Oh, no; not exactly that," faltered Joan. "But what I meant was—oh, just that you don't ever look at things seriously."

"Maybe you're right. I'm willing to admit, Joany, that I can't take the hunt for old Skip very seriously, although I will say, I know that Carlos would feel it if he ever came down to Roamwood and found the old nag missing. But," an entire change of mood was enveloped in that word, "what would he think if he knew that I had a little brother missing?"

"Don't be bitter, Ethel. Your brother isn't missing at all. It's just that you and he are separated," Joan tried to placate.

"Separated so far that each doesn't know

the other is on earth," added Ethel, her voice quavering.

But the train was flying past every remembered land-mark, and little stations were not even whistled at as the express thundered on. There was now no further time for confidences between the young passengers. They were putting on hats and picking up their magazines.

"Can I take your bags?" suddenly asked a voice in Joan's ear, and before she could answer, the accommodating train-man had both hers and Ethel's bag in his hands and was expertly calling out the approaching station to the waiting passengers.

Ethel looked volumes into Joan's face, but Joan was hurrying after the bags. As the little stepping stool was placed upon the platform she was the first one to step down upon it, and her blushing thanks for the bags left nothing for Ethel to do but pick up her own, and trot along the platform.

But only to a point of safety beyond the whirlwind of the departing train. Then she sat down upon a bench and kicking her slippered feet up and down to release her pent-up mirth, Ethel broke out into the merriest of laughs.

"Joan," she groaned. "How many beaux have we had since we left here? Did you think—to count them all?" she managed to ask between the outbursts.

"Land sakes, Ethel! Don't you believe *now* that you are silly, childish?" argued Joan. "There's Tillie! Whoo-hoo! Come along, Ethel. She doesn't see us and she does see that funny old Sykes. See, she's going to talk to him, Til-lee!" There was no one else around the little country station, so it was not awkward for Joan to call out.

Tillie saw them the next moment and left Nort Sykes with his mouth wide open ready to answer her question, as she shambled down the platform to meet the two returning wayfarers.

It was kinder for the girls to let Tillie splutter and stammer and squeal all her greetings first—kinder, because of the physical effort it obviously entailed, and was best to have over with. Tillie did struggle valiantly with the attempt.

"An' you've got company," she gulped, shaking head until her comical hat tottered and its faded flowers trembled apprehensively over her large and obtrusive ears. "Yes, sir, she's come. An' just wait till you see her!" The hat was jabbed

back to a center line. "She's so stuck up—she can hardly see through—her silky lashes." A sneer went with that last remark.

"Tillie," demanded Joan. "What are you talking about? Who's come?"

"Your coz." Tillie could be jaunty. She was acting really "cute" just now. "Sailed in, just when your granny—grandmother was getting everything fixed up. Wanted to surprise you. Here, gimme that bag."

Ethel straightened her floppy hat and tried to understand. She stared out of dark and blinking eyes at Tillie.

"More relatives?" she gasped. "Joan, I don't see that I need to hunt up any of mine. You have slathers to spare. Oh, there's mother! Whoo-hoo! Mummy!" And the flying rose-colored cloud that went in the general direction of the west side of the station, where a small touring car waited, represented Ethel meeting her mother.

"Just as well," remarked Tillie crisply. "Our car'll be full enough. I've been shoppin'. There's *our* car over there," she fondled the personal pronoun and pointed to a zebra-striped taxi. "Your gran'ma wanted I should fetch the things for to-morrow. Your cousin is awful perticular."

"Is grandma all right? Well, I mean," Joan asked anxiously. "She hasn't written me many letters."

"Well, I should say so. She's as chipper to look at, like the picture on my old calendar. And wait till you see the magic garden. There, I shouldn't have told you. It was to be a surprise——"

"Oh, that's all right, Tillie," answered the bewildered Joan. "I'll be more surprised than ever now."

CHAPTER X

A REAL SURPRISE

IT almost spoiled her homecoming, having to meet and make friends with a strange girl. Joan never could make friends quickly, especially among girls. She was too conscious of their veiled criticisms, and had too little conceit of her own.

"Oh, Mumsey-love," she exclaimed, hugging the proud possessor of that affectionate title. "I'm so glad to be home again and to see you—so"—she stood off a moment to make sure—"so fine," she concluded earnestly.

"And my little girl back again to me is just as—as precious as ever," whispered Grandma Benson into Joan's ready ear. "How well you look? And we have another little girl to share the summer with us," continued the grandmother, "a cousin from Greatlea. Her mother and father have gone abroad, and Norma didn't want to cross the ocean so she came to us. Norma," she called lightly, "come out and meet Joan."

Folks rich enough to go abroad—that detail oppressed Joan further. But the young girl who emerged from the house and joined them on the porch was really too attractive to do otherwise than impress one favorably. She was, Joan decided instantly, “a beautiful young society girl.”

“Oh, hello, Joan,” she said very simply. “I’m so glad you’ve come. Wasn’t it horrid on the train this stuffy day?”

“Not so very,” faltered Joan. Norma was a charming girl, but somehow there didn’t seem room for her in the old homestead. Joan felt her own place there usurped. How could she carry out all the summer plans of a tea-room and flower selling for the benefit of Brackin Lee, with a creature like Norma looking over her shoulder? And what about Tillie’s garden story?

The introductions were scarcely over when a little brown puffball of a poodle wagged out to them and barked foolishly at Joan’s heels.

“Oh, how cunning!” Joan heard herself say, but was glad Ethel hadn’t heard her. “Such a little brown ball!”

“Puffy,” explained Norma. “He has dreadful times with Tillie’s cat, but usually wins out.” She shrugged her shoulders as most girls do when emphasizing a point in their own favor. “Come

here, Puffy, you'll get stepped on," she warned the very small dog sample.

"Another intrusion," was Joan's disheartening thought. She could just imagine Ethel combating the interference of Norma and Puffy. Now she would surely have more fuel for her circus jokes with Skip in the "offing."

Puffy curled up into his mistress' arm with perfectly boneless intimacy. Against the white skin he seemed scarcely more than a cuff of summer fur.

Joan had now opportunity of noting the general outlines of Norma's personality. She got an impression of perfection: the tall, slender girl in her close fitting white linen dress, sleeveless and neckless, so like a cooking apron, Joan thought, only there was neither fullness, nor strings, but just a couple of embroidered yellow butterflies to show handwork and cost. Norma's hair was up—somehow up without break or design, just all piled up in a lovely blonde tower, with a little tier of wavy steps running up from the back of Norma's very white neck. Joan judged that Norma was a regular young lady, perhaps as old as eighteen years, and she decided the Cameo Girl would fit her beautifully as a title.

"As soon as you have a cool drink," said

Grandma Benson, easily guessing what Joan's thoughts were struggling with, "we will show you what we've been doing. Norma is quite an artist, and we've made you——"

"Oh, no, indeed, Auntie," interrupted Norma, "I'm not an artist, but this place is so romantic it is easy to think things to do with it. I'd swing a hammock under the trees and live in a tent if auntie would let me, Joan," she said lightly. "But she's afraid of all sorts of outdoor things."

It struck Joan, as it would, that this from Norma was betraying her idea of the apparent inadequacy of the old homestead for such as her, but she patted Puffy on her cousin's arm as she passed into the house, and immediately broke into an account of the wedding, the presents, the visit, Aunt Alice and all such thrilling details as were crowded into her memory kit for just this particular telling to Grandma Benson.

The recital naturally included some slight mention of Skip and Carlos, and the exciting time the girls had gone through in their first hour at Hillsdale.

"But it turned out to be so interesting," Joan said, her blue eyes lighting up with sky-tints as she allowed her keen interest in this phase of her

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trip to break through the unexpected disappointments of her homecoming. "You see, Mumsey," she insisted, "we've got to find old Skip and do all we can for Carlos. He seems to be such a worthy boy." Her voice was too low to reach Norma, who had tactfully remained out on the porch, but Joan felt it would be best to share Carlos' story with her grandmother immediately—in case he should turn up unexpectedly.

There was no denying it; Joan wanted to cry. She knew she was selfish, and she admitted, secretly, that she "perfectly hated all strange girls," but that didn't help her in the least. Well, she couldn't live in a band-box, she reasoned, but just this particular summer, when such important plans were to be carried out she did so want things to run smoothly.

"Norma has the low room over the side porch," Grandma Benson explained, her own voice filled with insistent good-nature. "She loves the vines around the windows, and won't even have screens in. I guess Norma longs for the simple things her mother finds no place for in her life. She is very temperamental and," the voice went fathoms lower, "I am inclined to think her refusal to go abroad was a little bit too temperamental. I can't see how Lottie would allow her to come

here to us, almost strangers, while she and Ben went off to Europe," Mrs. Benson concluded.

"It is queer," acquiesced Joan. "But how long will they be gone?"

"All summer."

"And will Norma stay here *all* summer?" Dismay is a poor pretender.

Her grandmother smiled. "She may visit friends on the coast. Norma is eighteen, you see, and Lottie, her mother, seems to think that is the age of emancipation. But wait until you see your garden, Joan." This thought brought relief. "It is too pretty for anything, and I'm sure your plans are going to work out beautifully."

Refreshed and re-dressed, a short time later, Joan found herself speechless before the wonder-garden wrought in her absence.

"Oh," she gasped, "it's too beautiful. How ever did you think of it all?" She was gazing spell-bound upon a landscape garden, "scaped" in the simplest possible manner, by the sensible plan of cutting and trimming the accumulated foliage of years into shape after a pattern that evolved little gardens, surrounded by protecting box-wood hedges, hardy flowers in spots outlined by margins cut neatly in rich green sod, clusters of waving gladiolas set off with flowing scarfs of red

and white phlox, until what had been for years merely a tangle of growth was now a most attractive and flourishing landscape garden.

"The place is perfectly adorable," declared Norma, without the least show of personal pride in the achievement. "I have always loved a place that has grown rich of its own accord. I detest the stilted applied gardens, such as *we* have."

"I'm so glad you like this," murmured Joan abstractedly. "And it was lovely of you to help. You see, I am expecting to sell flowers all summer."

"So Auntie said, but," there was a hint of opposition in Norma's tone, "don't you think it rather unusual to go—into business that way?"

"You see, my dear," Mrs. Benson hastened to intervene, "Joan and her friend Ethel, as I have told you, were raised at Brackin Lee, and they want to do something themselves, for children who are there and have no help from relatives. I have agreed that the plan was a very wise one. It will surely give them a little business experience——"

"Oh, yes. I know that, Auntie dear. But don't you think it will be rather trying to have to cater to the taste of strangers? Folks are so horrid

when they know that you must serve them with anything."

"But with flowers?" Joan defended. "Even flower missions for hospitals are—are sort of pleasant affairs," she argued.

"Of course, if you look at it that way," agreed Norma. "I've been on fruit and flower guilds lots of times and had lots of fun. But please don't let me discourage you. Come over and see what we have done with the jolly little brook."

At the brook Joan found a transformation even more remarkable than that surrounding the flower gardens, for the brook, so lately an obscure little stream, content to wind its way through the meadow and help along the patches of forget-me-nots and clumps of thrifty watercress, was now a real little lake, its banks widened by industrious trimming of bushes, trees and undergrowth. A path, a walkable path, was traced around it right up to the rustic springhouse, which was still draped beautifully with vines and foliage, and as pretty a spot as one might hope to find even on a much more pretentious estate than this.

"It's wonderful," repeated Joan, incredulously. "But hasn't it cost a lot?"

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"Oh, no," smiled Norma. "You see, I wouldn't stay unless Auntie would let me—do something. But we had to hurry to get it done while you were gone," she admitted.

"I should think you did. It's as pretty as a park," breathed Joan, who could scarcely believe her eyes. "You must have had a lot of men——"

"No, only three. But they were wonderful workers—service boys, you know," explained Norma. "They seemed to imagine the big tanks were following them up. Wasn't it simply done, Aunt Laura?"

"Surprisingly so," agreed Mrs. Benson. "I was almost mystified at the simple cutting and pruning working such a change. After all, brush and weeds can disfigure a place out of all proportion. Joan, I could hardly wait to tell you, but Norma made me keep the secret until you came."

"I never have seen anything so wonderful," repeated Joan, staring at the small wilderness transformed to a beauty spot. "I wish, Norma," she ventured politely, "you were interested in our charity. It seems as if you ought to have something out of all this."

"Oh, I will, never fear," replied Norma myste-

riously. "But I've had a lot of fun out of it already. Here, Puffy!" she called, for her pet was leaning over the open spring and making faces at himself in the clear water. "Don't fall in there. That's deep, cold water," she warned.

Joan was glad to hear Norma talk sensibly to the little dog, instead of affecting the nonsense so often associated with "babied" animals. She wondered, after all, if Norma might not prove a good friend, but she could not rid herself of a sense of her intrusion. Even the incredible improvements did not make up for that. But there was no more time for dallying. A garden was to be exploited and a tea-room inaugurated, for the sake of love and loyalty to dear old Brackin Lee.

It didn't seem like the same place to Joan, and a sense of strangeness stole over her, not really pleasant and a little apprehensive. What did Norma mean by inferring she would have some good times out of the pretty gardens? Her manner conveyed a meaning not clear, as if *she*, too had plans for the summer at Roamwood.

And she had not favored "going into business" even for charity. Well, Joan was not going to let any opinions interfere with her plans, that much was positive, and now her attention to Carlos'

affairs, with Skip lost, besides her promise to help Ethel trace her lost brother, afforded her plenty to do.

Joan was conscious of an overcrowded program. And each particular number claimed its own importance. All this flashed through her mind as she, with Norma and her grandmother, retraced her steps toward the house.

"The telephone is ringing," shouted Tillie's shrill voice from the kitchen door, "and I can't answer it. I'm too busy," she insisted, although why answering would have taken more time than calling was not clear.

"I'll go," offered Joan, wondering if the message would be from the little station toward which she had seen a horse, supposed to be Skip, trudging.

"Expecting a call?" said Norma, pleasantly.

But Joan was running along the newly outlined path, and had no time to answer.

CHAPTER XI

PRONE TO DISAPPEAR

A VOICE over the phone was floating into Joan's listening ear.

"Yes," it said. "We did fetch in the horse, tied him up, gave him a good drink and a feed——"

"Freed?" repeated Joan.

"Feed," emphasized the man speaking. He had introduced himself as the station agent at Briarlea, and Joan judged he was young and smart, his manner was so brisk and business-like.

"Oh, you fed him," she repeated happily, following the clearing up of her mistake.

"That's it. We lent him a nose-bag filled with good, fresh oats, and I don't mind saying we all enjoyed seeing him eat them. He was so hungry" (the voice was very jolly,) "we just all stood around to watch him eat. He snorted like a whitehead—could have heard him clear down to Roamwood."

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"His funny old sneeze," Joan was thinking. "The noise that Ethel was so sure she could tell him by," she silently decided.

"But say," came the query over the phone. "How could you tell he was the horse you were looking for?"

This was a difficult question to answer at a distance. Joan decided instantly that she could never say: "By the whiskers on his heels," so she replied:

"I'll come out and see him. I can drive out in the morning."

"Hey! Hold on! Wait—a—minute!"

The receiver at the other end had been left down, not hung up, and Joan could hear excited voices and a wild commotion. The man who had been talking to her was now calling wildly to some one.

"Stop him! Hey there! Come back here!" were among the exclamations that filtered in on Joan's end of the wire.

"How provoking!" she complained. "I wonder what can be the matter?"

"Your party doesn't answer, the receiver is off the hook," prompted the impersonal voice of the operator. Joan could still hear the confusion of men's voices at the other end.

"Oh, all right, then I'll hang up," she told the operator in ill humor and with a show of impatience. She put the receiver on the hook and stared reproachfully at the instrument. "Perhaps something happened to a train," she reasoned. "I'd better wait a few minutes before I call him back."

Telephone minutes always seem doubly long, and Joan was most anxious to have her call finished before Norma and her grandmother would come in. She was just about to ask for Briarlea when the bell jingled.

"This Miss Marsh?" came an excited voice, which she recognized as that of the man who had been talking to her.

"Yes; is this the agent at Briarlea?"

"Yes. Well, say! The queerest thing has happened," came back the man's voice. "While I was talking to you that horse—disappeared!"

"Disappeared!" shrieked Joan.

"Surest thing you know," declared the other speaker. "But he wasn't riderless this time. A boy took him off—I just saw him scamper down the road, but I couldn't leave the office to run after him. When the express goes by——"

"Did you say a boy took him?" asked Joan.

"Yes. And queer thing. The baggage man

says that same boy rode him in. He was off scouring for eats when you saw the horse alone."

"Oh, perhaps that was it." Joan's voice fairly pictured disappointment. "After all," she thought, "Carlos must have taken Skip from Mr. Kane's barn. And that was—like stealing him. If old Kane catches Carlos," persisted her unhappy reasoning, "he'll put him back in that horrid place Libby Kane told Aunt Alice about." But she must now answer the man over the wire.

"Oh, please don't bother any further," called back Joan. "Perhaps the boy who took him is the one who owned him. He was a boy—the one who really owned him was just a boy," she repeated to make the assertion clearer.

"Oh, I see," said the agent. "All right, then, if you say so." He hesitated and Joan thought his voice betrayed disappointment.

"I'm ever so much obliged," she called back distinctly.

"Oh, it was no trouble. The trainman, Peters, is a friend of mine and he wanted particularly to have you get trace of the horse. I'm afraid he'll think I fell down on the job, after all. But if you say a boy owned him——"

"Could you see whether the boy had very heavy black hair?" Joan asked.

"Seems to me it was black and heavy enough. He had no cap on and his head looked all hair as he flew off," declared the agent. "But I was going to tell you. That horse isn't as old as he looks and he's not a bad horse either. I'd say he has some very fine points," came the decided assertion.

"Is that so?" answered Joan. She could just hear Norma and her grandmother coming in.

"Yes, and I was going to suggest that you put him in the hands of a good horse-man and watch him—sprout!" This last was said in a half joking way, and Joan felt grateful to the stranger who offered such encouragement for Carlos' dumb friend.

She thanked him again, and taking his name (it was Tom Broker) promised to let him know if she should hear from Skip and the runaway rider. Her face was still flooded with excitement as she turned from the phone to meet Norma's questioning eyes.

"I've been having such a time," Joan attempted to explain. And then followed a rather disjointed account of the vicissitudes of Skip. To Joan's surprise Norma was intensely interested. She loved all animals, she declared, and considered a horse the king of the domestic group.

"But how can you be sure that this boy Carlos is the one who took him off?" Norma was reasoning rather than asking. "And had he a right to him, legally?"

"Oh, really, Norma," replied Joan. "I'm so confused and sort of upset. You see a boy and a horse——"

"I know, girlie," interrupted the cousin kindly, "and a boy is always a serious consideration. I'll tell you about *mine*, when we get a chance," she said under her breath, looking toward the dining room door as if apprehending the appearance there of Mrs. Benson.

"Your boy!" Joan repeated in an equally low tone of voice.

"Yes—see!" She was pointing with one finger to a ring on another.

"Oh!" breathed Joan. "You aren't—engaged?"

"Sh-ssh!" cautioned the older girl, touching her lip with a self-contained smile on her face. "I'll tell you—when we have a better chance."

The special meal that Tillie had prepared for Joan's welcome home included all the special dishes Joan loved, and it must be said, to show the maid's way of thinking, it also contained as many dishes as she could concoct that Norma

"hated." It was her childish way of doing things, and the joy she extracted from that sort of behavior was ever a source of wonderment to those around her. In fact, her former professed dislike for Joan had now turned into real affection, while Norma was made the object of antagonism.

Mrs. Benson smiled broadly at the very obvious display of all this. Two kinds of biscuits, "sweet and sody," were not really called for, and the opening of two jars of the very last canned fruit, pears and peaches, seemed extravagant. Norma always took dry toast, but with two kinds of biscuits, neither of which she touched, Tillie "hadn't time for breakfast stuff at supper time."

Joan offered to make some toast for Norma, but the cousin wouldn't hear of it.

"It will do me good to go without bread," Norma declared. "I'll take a potato. It can't make me too fat just to indulge in one."

This remark precipitated a veritable outbreak from the excited maid. She couldn't see why "skinny folks thought themselves nice," and she believed "so much toast would turn a skin to leather." Not to mention a long list of other evils that, according to Tillie, were sure to follow such a line of eating as Norma pursued.

Joan looked on with unhidden interest. She

had never before met a girl like Norma, except one would have classed the Wallace girls at Hillsdale in the same category. Joan was still the little girl from Brackin Lee, and that there existed such perfect specimens of young womanhood as Norma represented, had been to her up to this time, merely hearsay. As the cousin ate her selected meal and the sparkling ring on her third finger left hand sent out its mysterious gleams, Joan could, for the moment, almost put aside her anxiety for Carlos and Skip, in this rather exciting new interest.

But it worried her to know that Carlos was in danger. He had been so brave to shield the other boy, at his own risk, from that queer man who followed him. Joan could not quite put these thoughts aside. And that he must have taken Skip from Kanes' after Joan and Ethel had pledged themselves to get the horse—this seemed the hardest thing of all to understand.

Joan's grandmother was asking her all sorts of questions concerning the wedding and its attendant pleasures, and Joan was answering them as best she could, although any one would have known her mind was not upon the subject.

"I wish I hadn't sent that message to the station at Briarlea," she pondered. "If they go to

tracing Skip—if old Kane does, I'll surely get mixed up in—horse-stealing!”

Wild West! Lassoing! Cow-boys! Even branding! The word horse-stealing conjured up the whole horrible list, and Joan choked so hard on a “sody biscuit” she was obliged to leave the table.

The meal was finally over, much to every one's relief and much to Tillie's disappointment, “that Joany only ett as much as Esmeralda.” At last Joan managed to phone Ethel.

She begged her to come over, to coax some one to drive her over, because, Joan insisted, she simply had to see her. She couldn't wait until morning, and she, Ethel, just had to come.

“What's up?” asked Ethel, in her humorous drawl. “More relatives discovered upon the grounds?”

“Oh, Ethy! The grounds! Wait until you see them!” gurgled Joan. “I think we'll have to run a pleasure park instead of a tea-room——”

“Whew!” whistled Ethel. “How was it done? Magic or something?”

“It looked like it to me at first,” Joan admitted. “But it was really very simple. The place was all overgrown. Norma and Mumsey are outside now. We've got a new hose.

They're watering. But hurry over. It's about Carlos and Skip."

"Got Carlos there too?"

"Oh, no. Of course not, silly. But I've had a message from Briarlea——"

"I knew you would!" sang out Ethel cheerily. "That trainman just looked——"

"Ethel Burke!" snapped back the excited Joan. "It wasn't from him. It was from the *agent*. But come on over. I've got to help Tillie. She has too many dishes. Hurry up, Ethy. I'm just dying——"

"Don't die until I see you. I've never yet witnessed a death bed scene——"

But Joan slammed down her receiver to check that sort of mirth. Ethel made a poor choice of subjects to joke about, she decided.

"Better watch out for my red-head," Joan warned herself, as she "flew around," renewing her acquaintance with the homestead, helping Tillie with dishes, trying to change her opinion of Norma and otherwise keeping herself rather busy.

And she talked. She couldn't help it, and coincidentally she found comfort now in Tillie's companionship. She told her something about Carlos, and a good deal about Skip.

"I do hope you get the horse," agreed the

maid. "It would be just fine for us to have a horse to drive to town," she enthused, shining her saucepan vigorously. "Why don't you try to fetch him here? There's the old barn and plenty of grass. You know, Joany, I'm a first-rate farmer."

"Oh, really, Tillie, that would be fine. You could help to deliver our orders. Maybe," Joan suggested, "we'll take orders for ice cream and we'd have to deliver that."

What miracles affection works? Here were Joan and Tillie planning together like old friends, growing more enthused at each sentence, and it all came about because Tillie showed affection for Joan in her homecoming, and Joan showed reliance upon Tillie in making the summer plans.

A familiar honk on an auto horn brought Joan to the window.

"It's Ethy, Tillie," she cried. "Won't you be glad to see her?"

"I sure will," declared the reformed Tillie. "She's a real natural, lively girl, if she is a bit forward. And she's getting thinner and better-looking——"

But Joan was out at the drive dragging Ethel toward the porch, there to be introduced to the impressive, stylish, good-looking and cultured Norma.

CHAPTER XII

ETHEL'S OUTBURST

A WEEK had passed without bringing any further news of Skip or Carlos. The girls were losing faith in the boy, Ethel especially being outspoken to the extent of suspecting him of being merely another homeless, friendless boy, "not bad but foolish."

Joan maintained secret hopes that he would soon send them some message, but she was too busy with her tea-room and garden plans to worry much about it just now.

The garden was fairly bursting with blooms, and it did not take Norma long to learn that selling bouquets to autoists "for charity" was not different at all from selling them at a bazaar. In fact she "fell-to" as Tillie expressed it, and was taking keen pleasure in showing folks over the rambling old gardens, and listening to their constantly echoed opinions anent the beauties of The Homestead.

This was the title that, as Ethel said, "was

wished upon the place, and it served it perfectly." Selling flowers, however, was much simpler than selling tea. Tea was now served on the vine-sheltered porch and in-doors at quaint old tables in the library, as that room opened directly off the front hall. But getting the tea process in real working order had taken more patience than Tillie ever laid claims to, or than Joan knew she possessed.

Tea was only sold three days each week, but the trouble was that folks asked for tea from eleven in the morning until seven-thirty in the evening, and to keep tea going, fresh and hot, with dainty little biscuits at first, and later the box-bought confections, meant work and attention. Ethel thought at first she would never tire "serving," but when a few fussy folks came in wanting tea, a pot of hot water, three slices of lemon, and a small pitcher of cream, all for four cups of tea and the crackers that went with it free, Ethel promptly went on strike.

Joan's Mumsey had everything ready in the way of equipment. It was a real joy to her to get out the old gold-and-white china cups and the extra fine dozen with gold-and-maroon bands. Norma had protested that these were much too delicate for a tea-room, but her Aunt Laura

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argued that the china had been stored away so long, ever since Joan's mother had packed it up before she went away, that now it would be like a thanksgiving offering to use it in the cause of Brackin Lee. So it was that when the girls returned from the wedding they found, as Ethel declared joyously, "everything set for the show."

But she and Joan were "to run the show," so they promptly took it upon themselves to go in town and buy two dozen little cups and saucers with old-fashioned blue figures on them, to carry out the old homestead idea. Also they bought paper plates, the wipe-off kind, for biscuits and cakes. Then the paper napkins! These were as fascinating as any pretty things ever displayed in the shops, but to go with the blue china, pure white was finally decided upon, also because they would never run out of stock in the convenient little fancy store at the Center.

Norma had such a liberal allowance and seemed so generous with it, that the other girls had to be smart, indeed, to make the purchases without allowing her to contribute.

"She has spent so much upon the grounds," Joan repeated to Ethel, "it doesn't seem fair."

"Besides *we* want *some* credit," declared Ethel,

to whom the adventure was more of a lark than an enterprise.

"Of course," admitted Joan, as she and Ethel were arranging the small tables on the porch. "Norma expects her friend to pay her a visit here. It seems he's very artistic and she wants——"

"To impress him!" broke in Ethel. "I knew she had some other motive in transforming the old homestead into a Garden of Eden. Does she plan eloping while her folks are away?"

"Ethel Burke! You're perfectly horrible!" declared Joan. "Do you think Mumsey would allow anything like that?"

"Not if she knew it, but I thought all elopements were strictly private affairs." Ethel was looking very pretty in her new golden gingham, made purposely for tea-service, and very becoming to her dark eyes and black hair. In fact, just as Joan had affectionately predicted long ago, Ethel was growing up to be quite handsome.

Joan's unchangeable curls, of still vivid golden brown, kept her looking more girlish than her chum, and not even packages of hair pins and Ethel's expert dressing could put Joan's hair and head on anything like a grown-up basis.

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But she was wiser than Ethel. She had not repeated to her the story Norma so confidentially told her about "her boy." Ethel was too frank at guessing, and not exactly wise in publishing her suppositions.

The girls had only just finished setting the tea-tables for Twilight-tea, when an automobile stopped at the driveway.

"It's grandpa!" declared Ethel, "and of course the infant is with him. Wouldn't you wonder how that gentleman could find anything interesting in our tea?"

"He comes to please the youngster, I guess," replied Joan, hurrying out to get a pot of the inevitable hot water. "I like them both better than any others who come. And they always want to leave something extra."

"Generous. But that little boy, Joan, makes me sort of—heart sick; my brother ought to be about his age."

"Get the fresh cookies; he loves them," called back Joan, as she hurried kitchen-ward.

The gentleman was tall, iron gray, but not really elderly. He was on the porch now, where he stopped to talk to Mrs. Benson, while the boy, Patsy, was already romping toward his favorite chair under the old steel engraving of George and

Martha. There Ethel and Joan had prepared the particular little spread for small Patsy.

"'Lo there!" called out the youngster. "I fetched grandpa again. He didn't want to come but I made him. Got any sugar cookies?"

"Goody for you," chanted Ethel. "Always fetch grandpa," she advised, beaming lovingly upon the small boy in his little sailor suit, his bare brown legs dangling expectantly from the old-fashioned chair. He was a handsome little chap, dark, with a head of brown curls that perhaps partly accounted for Ethel's infatuation. But to Joan his vivid red cheeks were the point of fascination. They were red as apples, and their glow gave Patsy that charm of ruddy boy-hood ever irresistible.

"Cookies! Cookies!" he demanded, as Ethel filled his tall glass with milk. "Our cook can't make this kind." Joan had uncovered the surprise dish and Patsy was proving his assertions.

"I hope that old poke, Mrs. Jennings, doesn't come prowling along just now," murmured Ethel to Joan, as they met at the side table to get more powdered sugar for Patsy's cookies. "I just love to hear that youngster prattle."

Joan could not help but draw a contrast from this speech of Ethel's and that which she so often

criticized Joan with, when Joan used to fondle the little ones at Brackin Lee. That affection Ethel had always characterized as foolish, silly, and a big nuisance. Was she, as Joan told her lately, just growing up? Or was it the sense of loss of the baby brother that was finding some relief in her attention to Patsy?

"Why are you Patsy?" Ethel asked him. "Is that really your name?"

"'Course it is," defended the cookie nibbler.

"Patsy what?" ventured Ethel.

"Patsy cory-iry-ay! Captain of the railway!" chanted the youngster gayly.

"Oh, it's just a—a nick-name," Ethel said smiling at the boy.

"'Tain't either; not no nick-name. It's the very name my daddy gave me, and my mother."

"Then you must be Irish," joked Ethel, just as the gentleman entered the hall, and after laying his straw hat on the hat rack joined them in the tea-room.

Joan sauntered over "to take his order." Although the tea-room had not yet been two weeks in operation she was no longer self-conscious nor awkward in serving.

"Well, now," said the man politely. "I wonder



"COOKIES! COOKIES!" HE DEMANDED AS ETHEL FILLED
HIS TALL GLASS WITH MILK.

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what Patsy is eating? His whole-wheat crackers——”

“Cookies! Cookies! Sugar ones!” confessed the guilty one. “She gave them to me, Ethel did. See this one is Ethel.”

“How do you do, Miss Ethel,” greeted the tall man, arising from his chair and bowing politely.

Ethel flushed consciously. She had not expected Patsy to be so direct.

“She’s my—my best friend,” insisted the little fellow. “She allus has a whole lot of sugar cookies for me.”

“Now, that’s fine, that is if mother doesn’t know it, son.” The blinking, winking eyes explained what would have otherwise sounded like poor judgment from grandpa. “Of course mother allows you some cookies——” he conceded.

“Shall I fetch you iced tea?” asked Joan quietly. “Perhaps it’s too warm for hot tea?”

“Iced tea! Now I call that sumptuous, simply splendid. I’ve just been telling Mrs. Benson how fine all this seems to me. To have two little girls open up a home and garden for such a worthy cause. Take care your fame doesn’t spread be-

yond bounds," the gentleman warned. "First thing you know there'll be picture men shooting up movies of the two little girls who became famous."

"Movies! Movies!" cried out the boy. "I'm goin' in the movies. Aren't I, grandpa? Can't I do stunts?" and he slid down from the chair as smoothly as a kitten might have done, put two capable little brown hands down on the blue rug and turned his heels over his head, once, twice, three times, stopping only because he met a table, head-on, and there his heel set the tea things clattering.

"Fine! Fine!" clapped Ethel. "You surely will be a movie actor if you keep that up. I never saw such—such clean cut hand-springs."

"Regular flip-flops," chimed in Joan. "But lookout for your head, Patsy. That table is pretty hard."

The boy stood up and faced his spectators expectantly. It was evident that Patsy's "stunts" usually brought him praise, for his grandfather applauded and complimented him liberally while the small actor bowed and accepted the attention like a little veteran.

As he went back to his tall glass of milk, and began gathering up cookie crumbs instead of

drinking the wholesome beverage, Ethel's eyes were fastened upon him. Joan, watching her, wondered at the seriousness of her manner, but the gentleman was emptying his glass of iced tea and Joan hurried to offer him another.

"Say!" sang out Patsy to the spell-bound Ethel. "Couldn't you get me one more cookie? Just one little more?" She was about to shake her head negatively when the youngster called out gayly:

"Let's play a game. You be my big sister while my mother's away. Then you can give me all the cookies—what's the matter?" he asked. "What you—crying for?"

"Oh, Patsy, don't," broke out poor Ethel, running from the room and bursting into tears as she went. "I can't be any little boy's big sister," she murmured, sobbing bitterly on the sofa at the end of the hall.

Mrs. Benson and Norma came in from the porch at Joan's request, and attended to those who were just strolling in for refreshments. Patsy was so surprised, and evidently felt somehow to blame for Ethel's outbreak, that he begged his grandfather to come on home, quick. That gentleman, sensing something unpleasant and perhaps embarrassing in the situation, paid

his check by dropping a bill into the cut-glass bowl, and then following the scampering Patsy out to their car.

"What is the matter, Ethel dear?" Joan tried to soothe her chum. "What makes you feel so badly?"

"Oh, Joany, I just can't stand it," wailed Ethel, trying to smother her sobbing voice so that it would not reach the strangers. "Mother Burke has been trying to find my little brother—but—but——"

"You will find him, Ethy. Don't worry so——"

"No, he's gone!" She bit her trembling lip violently. "We can't find him because—Aunt Martha gave him away! Oh, Joany, how could she have done that to my little brother?"

"Come on upstairs, Ethel," coaxed Joan. "Here's Tillie with a tray of tea for us. Let's drink it. It won't hurt us and maybe it will make you feel better."

Tillie had overheard the sobbing and, in her new guise of true friend to the girls, was doing all that she could do to offer comfort.

"Best thing in the world for nerves," she declared. "Drink it up, Ethel dear. It's your head that aches. That little boy always kicks up such

a fuss. I just wouldn't have him capering around——”

But Joan was leading Ethel upstairs, while Tillie followed with the tray of crackers and over-rated tea.

Running a tea-room was, after all, as Norma had predicted, rather a strain. Meeting strangers had certain drawbacks.

But the scene so innocently precipitated by little Patsy was but the beginning of Ethel's melancholy turn. She was suddenly conscience-stricken and felt guilty to have taken the home offered her without having made any attempt to find the little lone brother. She imagined all sorts of horrible things having happened to him, and perhaps Tillie was wiser than she realized when she declared that Ethel was suffering with “nerves.”

“Can you come with me to-morrow, Joan?” she begged. “It's away outside the city in a—a poor neighborhood, but perhaps an old woman there may—know—something!”

“Certainly we'll go, dear. Norma will drive us——”

“Oh, no, not Norma, Joan. I want to go alone, just you and I——”

“All right, we'll go,” promised Joan soothingly.

CHAPTER XIII

UNWELCOME SECRETS

CRYING herself into a real headache, Ethel was obliged to go home and leave Joan to depend upon Norma's help for a busy twilight, both on the porches and in the tea-room. But business was so brisk there was no time to worry about Ethel. Even Norma's well-trained poise was fluttery with excitement, and when she and Joan counted over the contents of the glass bowl they had thirty-three dollars!

"Would you believe so many people would find us out here?" panted Joan. "And only that little rustic sign to guide them."

"It's the lip service that is bringing them," replied Norma wisely. "And, Cousin Brick-top, I must say you are a genius to plan the thing. Even my beautiful garden with its continuous blooms does not net us as much as does Tillie's unfailing tea-pot. Joan, this is a genuine gold mine."

"But, Norma," argued Joan, her big blue eyes

fondling her pretty cousin, "the garden is—is simply enchanting. Patsy's grandfather said this afternoon it was the most natural piece of natural art he had ever surveyed, and you know *he* is a good judge."

"I guess he is," agreed Norma. "What's his name, Joany? Aunt Laura seems to know him."

"His name is Denton, I believe, and Mumsey knows him because *he* knew Uncle Roger before war times. Mr. Denton was a captain or something. And oh, say, Norma," Joan interrupted herself, "I had a letter to-day from Margaret. They are away out in Washington territory looking after forest or something, and they won't be home before the end of summer. I do so want you to know Margaret. She's a war hero, you know," declared Joan, enthusiastically.

"I'm sure she must be splendid. But don't you think, Redny, that the war stuff is awfully stale?"

"Norma Brooks! I'm—I'm—war—stuff!" declared Joan. "I'm a flag-orphan, for that matter——"

"Oh, lovey-dear!" and Norma's hands dropped all the tea money into her lap as her arms flew out to Joan. "How stupid I am! Really I am the most spoiled creature——" She paused and

her eyes looked blindly at the small, yellow shaded fairy lamp, beside which they had been counting the day's proceeds.

"Oh, that's all right, Norma," Joan hurried to condone. "I know what you mean, of course. But you see, Margaret is such a special friend, and now she's my aunt. Think of that?"

"And my cousin, think of that!" Norma put the money in her small strong box. Tillie had gone upstairs and Mrs. Benson was lowering blinds and locking up generally. But the summer's night was warm, and heavy with the fragrance of dew-drenched vegetation, of flowers "coming out" for the next day's customers, of grass, velvety soft for a new day's admiration, and of trees triumphant in their stately grandeur; all awaiting the call of Brackin Lee's cause to do justice to the girls' adventure.

"Come on out on the side porch a while," suggested Norma. "I've got—more secrets to tell."

Joan hesitated. Norma's secrets were rather a burden, since she, Joan, had promised not to share them with Ethel. But Norma's cameo beauty was not easy to oppose, so Joan, after putting the money-box on the stairs, passed out through the small side door on to the porch,

there to sit very close to Norma on the swing, while she whispered her secrets.

"But first tell me," began Norma. "What was the matter with Ethel? What was she crying for?"

Joan had previously put Norma off with mere snatches of Ethel's history, and now she still hesitated to go into the vague story of the lost brother. But Norma pressed.

"Is Ethel unhappy? Most over-jolly girls are, don't you think?"

"She never was unhappy before," defended Joan. "But since we came back from Hillsdale she seems sort of moody. You see she is separated from her—folks"—this was one way of putting it—"and sometimes when she sees children like Patsy, she had a little brother, why, she sort of gets homesick for her own folks. You have no idea, Norma, how I longed to find my own folks," said Joan, hoping to swerve from the topic of Ethel's unhappiness. "I just used to cry my eyes out——"

"Queer, I don't miss mother or dad," admitted Norma. "But, you see, I have always had them, and don't you think fussy, bossy parents are just dreadful to get along with?"

"Norma, you don't mean that about your folks. Mumsey says your mother is an accomplished musician——"

"Exactly. She sings all her love out on the air and has none left for me. You can believe it, Joan, that talented people are all apt to be horribly selfish." Norma's voice was full of vindictiveness.

"Do you sing?" asked Joan. "We are going to have music here when Margaret and Roger come back."

"Oh, yes, I sing," said Norma indifferently. "But it isn't my chief mode of expression. I simply adore the outdoors. I just had to fix up the garden. At home, of course, we have a man, and I daren't touch the old place. You see, Joany"—her voice was low as the whisper through the trees—"my lover, Bobbie, is a—poet."

"Oh, yes, I know," faltered Joan. Norma had told her about the poet.

"And you should see the letters he writes me. Joan, don't you think it perfectly horrid of mother to—oppose us?"

Joan was not much good at sermons, ever, but surely this called for doctrine. She almost feared Norma's next sentence.

"It often seems horrid, I know," Joan ventured, "but the older folks——"

"Oh, Joan Marsh! You don't mean one single word you say. And I thought I had about won you over to my side," pouted the beautiful Norma.

"You have done such a lot for us, Norma." Joan was grateful. "I never could have run the place as we had planned without you. We didn't know what it really meant, and you see, we counted on having girls come in from the Lee to help us. But Miss Lawrence, the house-mother, was afraid it might——"

"I know; make them discontented. Poor tots; I don't wonder," sighed Norma. "But perhaps the money we make will afford them some extras—I mean provide treats for them. Joan, don't you want to hear my secret?"

Joan thought quickly. Here was her chance. So she said:

"May I tell Ethel? You saw how heartsick she was and she's like a baby under interesting influence. It is the easiest thing in the world to—liven her up."

"More good deeds. Well, perhaps you can tell her a part, but please don't tell her I am planning to elope!"

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"To elope! Norma!"

"Of course, child. Else why did you think I wouldn't go to Europe?"

"But, Norma, you can't!" gasped Joan. "You would have to tell Mumsey——"

"Silly baby. One doesn't tell any one about elopements."

"Then why tell me?"

A childish laugh betrayed Norma's simplicity. After all she was but a child, only a few years older than Joan and had not been brought up under the same character-building advantages. Norma was the product of wealth and culture, but probably because her mother "sang all her love to the winds" the daughter had been stunted. And her romantic nature was now resenting the privation.

She put her arm about Joan who was just attempting to leave the swing. Norma must have some one to listen to her secrets; that's the way with sentimentalists.

"I don't want to be unfair, Joan," she said gently, "but you don't know how much good it has done me to be here with you. You see, I'm probably an awful snob."

"Oh, no, you're not, Norma," defended Joan.

"But honestly I can't listen to elopement and not—tell Mumsey. It isn't safe."

"Joan! You wouldn't—you promised——"

"No such thing, Norma. I couldn't promise to help you do a—foolish thing." Joan was raising her voice a little, and although her grandmother was on the opposite side of the house she might have heard at least suspicious whispering.

"Oh, baby. I was only teasing," rejoined Norma beguilingly. "But if you tell Aunt Laura—I'll run off myself, alone," she threatened. "That would be worse, wouldn't it?"

"Norma Brooks, I think you're awful," pouted Joan, realizing that her cousin was sort of cajoling her into a secret promise. "Please don't tell me any more——"

"All right. I see you are not interested in Bobbie and I'm sorry he's coming here," snapped Norma, in her turn jumping up from the swing. "At any rate, he won't stay long. He is taking a summer course at college."

"Norma, listen," pleaded Joan, alarmed at the turn things had taken. "I am sort of worried about Ethel. She's so—blue, and I know, if you wouldn't mind, and I just told her you expected—Bobbie," Joan gulped on the name, "she would

be interested and lose at least *some* of her—glumps.”

“Oh, certainly, then do tell her, Joany,” agreed the cousin. “And please forgive me for being spiteful. You see, I’ve admitted being a spoiled child,” and she wound the usual arm around Joan. “I’ve learned a lot here already——”

“Is your—Bobbie very young?” Joan asked out of mere politeness.

“Just a year older than I am, and so, so unusual-looking, Joan. Just wait until you see him,” Norma promised ecstatically.

“But you don’t mean it about—eloping, do you, Norma?” pleaded Joan, anxiously.

“Well, we’ll see. You be awfully nice to me if you want me to be good. There’s Aunt Laura. And what’s that!”

“The money box! Tillie has fallen over it. Hurry, she’ll be blaming us for breaking her neck. There’s Esmeralda! What’s the matter, Mumsey?” called out Joan, entering the dimly lighted hall. “Who spilled the cash box?”

“I did, if you want to know,” snapped Tillie, just as Joan had expected. “And it wasn’t your fault that I didn’t break my neck, either.”

“Of course it wasn’t, Tillie, and it wasn’t our

fault that you fell either——” Norma didn’t believe in coaxing Tillie.

“Hush,” cautioned Joan. “Don’t get her started.”

But the warning came too late, for Tillie was headed straight for a rampage, and Norma, having “crossed her,” came in for the brunt of it.

“And you can mail your own letters after this,” threatened the irate maid. “I’ll not run around with any more of your silly telegrams.”

“Please, Tillie,” begged Norma, now hurrying to the side of the woman with the ugly cat in her arms. “I won’t ask you to do anything else for me, ever. But just now—please—keep—quiet——”

Tillie was not, however, so easily subdued, and Norma’s anxiety to stop her was obviously significant.

Joan wondered just what part of the dangerous secret Tillie shared. It concerned messages, perhaps to the poetic Bobbie——

“Children, children!” called the silvery haired lady, who was all this time waiting in the rear end of the hall, “you must get in bed. I’m glad we don’t have the tea-room opened every day in the week. It seems to give you rather too much excitement.”

"I guess you are right, Mumsey," Joan gladly agreed. "Three days a week do seem plenty. And I'm sure we'll make our quota too, if things keep going as they are. Let's get to bed, Norma," she suggested, for the cousin was still trying to appease Tillie by gathering up the scattered coins and sympathizing with the maid's near-accident. "You put the box away this time. You may have better luck than I did."

"Please take it, Aunt Laura," Norma offered the little black box. "Every time my curtain flops I imagine it's somebody after our cash."

"Needn't fear that," Tillie spoke up. "About the only thing your Puffy is good for is wakin' folks out of a sound sleep to yelp at flappin' curtains. There he goes now. Here, Puffy!" and the unfathomable Tillie was racing out in the kitchen after little brown Puffy, while Esmeralda humped up her back and got ready to fight for her rights should Tillie make the mistake of giving any personal attention to a mere dog, and a visitor at that.

CHAPTER XIV

A LATE CALLER

THE mere mention of a money box seems to invite disturbance. Joan couldn't get to sleep. She tossed and turned, thinking of Ethel's outburst and of Norma's threat.

"I don't believe she'd elope," reasoned the sleepless one. "It would be too silly."

But there followed visions of many other silly girls who had eloped, and they were no older than Norma, either.

"She's just got a fit of romance," went on Joan's soliloquy. "Like I had when I first knew Margaret, only my dreams were for Margaret, not for myself. Still"—Joan did yawn hopefully—"I suppose the idea is about the same. Girls have just got to love things romantic."

Puffy gave one of his yelps—Norma's door was ajar and, following the yelp, her small dog toddled out to the top of the stairs.

"Hush, Puff," cautioned Joan, "go back to bed."

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"Whow—whow," answered Puffy with his brown nose inside Joan's door although it was too dark to see either the nose or its color, but the little call indicated both.

"What is it? What do you want?" asked Joan, as quietly as she could do it to be heard by the dog and unheard by others.

"Yoow-oo-whow!" snapped Puffy, trotting off, down the stairs, as Joan snapped on her light and prepared to follow him.

She was not the least bit afraid; it was still early and summer nights seem never late. Joan imagined some one might be calling, just because the homestead could not now be considered a strictly private residence, and if some one did want tea at that hour of the night, she could dismiss them without opening the door or waking the others.

"But I didn't hear any car," she was thinking. "Dear me, I must hurry! That dog will wake everybody," and she did hurry, whispering admonitions to Puffy as she went.

She turned on a light in the hall and went into the long parlor, that she might peer out through a window and be able to see if any one was on the porch.

She heard a step, light, stealthful. Then she

saw a figure. It was not a man, too small for a man, but it was—a boy!

“Carlos! It must be Carlos!”

Picking up the little dog to make sure of his silence, Joan tapped upon the window. As she did so the boy, following the sound, came very quietly over and, turning toward her, the moonlight full upon him, she saw as she had expected, Carlos!

“What is it?” she spoke through the glass. “I can’t come out now.”

“This.” He motioned to a letter he held. “I’ll put it under the door.”

“Wait—wait——” Joan was eager to speak to the boy, but reasoned against opening the door. That old man might still be following him. So she shook her head to let him see she understood, and then hurried to the door.

The white paper was quietly slipped under the heavy outer portal. As Joan took it she pushed back the bolt very quietly. Then she opened the door the width of the chain guard.

“Oh, Carlos!” she whispered. “What is the matter? Why did you come so late?”

“I was workin’ and couldn’t get off earlier. And I had to tell you, I found Skip.”

“Yes, I know. We found him too. That is

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we saw him." She couldn't explain the railroad incident now. "But, Carlos, where are you working? I want to talk to you—I must. Can't you come to-morrow?"

"After work?"

"I must hurry," Joan glanced anxiously at the stairs; no one seemed to be moving. "Carlos, I've got so much to tell you and we have a big garden here now. Maybe we could give you work——"

She was looking into a pair of very dark eyes. The dim hall light threw a shadow right into the door-crack and upon the boy's face. It seemed much older to Joan, almost as if Carlos had grown up. Then she noticed the heavy hair had been cropped close and he was wearing a dark shirt. His trousers, too, she saw, went down to his ankles, and with all these changes Carlos naturally did look older.

"What time can you come?" she asked. Puffy was getting fidgety and Joan knew she must close that door.

"Maybe you could come over to my place," suggested Carlos. "They're awful nice folks."

"Where is it?"

"It's in the letter."

"All right, I must go."

"Good-night——"

"Carlos—is Skip all right?"

"Fine. Fat and sleek——"

"I'm glad. I was worried about Skip——"

"He's some horse." The assurance that accompanied the simple words inferred complete satisfaction. Surely Skip must be fine and fat and sleek and perhaps a good-looking horse by this time. Joan wondered should she propose taking him off Carlos' hands. Tillie had shown eagerness to have him; there was plenty of room in the old barn, and even Norma had seemed interested.

"Do you want to keep him?" breathed Joan. The chain had been released and Carlos was turning away.

"Do you?" he asked.

"Well, I'll see. Good-night. I must——"

A stir upstairs warned her that she really must get back to her room. Puffy had been very good—she would give him a chocolate from her new box.

Safely behind her own door again she unfolded Carlos' note.

"Poor boy," she thought, "he doesn't seem to trust the mails. I suppose he has never had much reason to use them."

The paper in her hand showed evidence of

rough usage. Likely Carlos had made more than one attempt at writing it. He began without form of greeting.

"I'm in a fine place," she read, "and Skip is with me. I found him out on the road near Briarlea station and I had to ride hard to get away with him."

Joan knew this part of the story and smiled as she recalled. She read on.

"I wanted to come over but things got ripe quick and we was awful busy. All well hope you are the same. I'll come over soon. This is where I am at, Livalong. That's the name of the place, it's behind the old big tree on Brookfield road. Excuse mistakes and bad spelling. Carlos Torrell."

Joan read and reread. The writing was fairly legible, and the spelling not beyond understanding. Carlos must have made pretty good use of his time while at school for a boy who had been subjected to such hardships as he had gone through.

"Livalong," Joan repeated, recalling the name as that of a well known farm. Tillie had spoken of it, and, Joan recalled, she had brought eggs and great luscious strawberries from Livalong.

"But it might look queer for me to go there

looking for a work boy," Joan considered. Then she recalled her promise to go with Ethel, in the morning, some place out in the slums, in search of clues that might locate the lost brother.

It was late indeed when Joan gave in to sleep, and the night that was left was all too short to give her sufficient refreshing slumber. Ethel was down stairs waiting for her next morning, before Joan had dressed.

"Come on up, Ethy!" she called. "I'm lazy this morning."

"So I see," replied Ethel dryly. "But to hustle, Joan. Mother is going to drive us, she wouldn't let me go alone and we've got to get back to fetch father home for lunch." Ethel's voice betrayed some nervousness and Joan noticed she was just wearing a skirt and sweater, not one of her pretty summer dresses.

"I'll be ready in a jiff, Ethel," Joan promised. "I've got a lot to tell you. Here, read that letter. It's from Carlos."

"Carlos!" Ethel concentrated upon the rumpled piece of paper. It took but a few moments to read it.

"So he's got your precious Skip," she remarked, not sarcastically but in her usual bantering manner. "Are you satisfied now?"

"He took him from the station, just as I expected——"

"How do you know?"

"He was here late last night——"

"Seems to me he comes at odd hours——"

"But he's working on a farm, and they were picking berries——"

"All right, Joan. I'm glad you've got Skip off your mind, anyhow. My worries are more serious than those about an old horse." Ethel was in that state of anxiety that makes some people cross. It affected her just that way.

Mrs. Burke was talking with Mrs. Benson on the porch. It was one of the days when the tea-room would not be opened, but Norma was already selling flowers to some customers who always wanted phlox with the dew upon it. Whatever explanation Mrs. Burke made to Joan's grandmother it seemed satisfactory, for both were ready to go with the girls when Joan came out after a hurried breakfast.

"I'm so glad you're coming, Mumsey," Joan said, for indeed her grandmother still needed rides, to assist her weakened limbs. "It's a perfect morning for a drive."

"With Norma here I feel I can go and leave Tillie," Mrs. Benson explained. "Strangers will

wander in," she said to Mrs. Burke. "I don't believe we, any of us, quite realized what we were undertaking in Joan's summer adventure."

"But it is so successful," declared Mrs. Burke. She was the jolly stout woman who had found beauty in the awkward Ethel whom she adopted from Brackin Lee. "Every one is talking about your place, Mrs. Benson," she declared. "Why, it's being called the show place of Roamwood." They were seated in the car, which Mrs. Burke drove, as she continued her conversation.

"And I think," she pointed out, "it is only fitting that your old homestead should be better known. Since you gave two children to the war——"

"Mother," interrupted Ethel, leaning over to the front seat, "Joan wants to go by the back road. She wants to see the Livalong farm along there."

"We'll come back that way," promised the driver, "this is the best road to go out."

Ethel was trying to tell Joan where they were going.

"It makes me feel so sort of—degraded," she said, a little brokenly, "to think that my folks used to live among—foreigners."

"Ethel Burke! Honestly you almost make me

laugh. To talk like that!" accused Joan. "As if you didn't know we were all foreigners a few centuries ago, and the old country people have the best of us still in—in lots of ways," declared Joan, trying to cheer up Ethel.

"Well, perhaps," agreed her companion grudgingly. "We've searched everywhere around Aunt Martha's place. She never lived out in Stump Hollow. But when—when my mother and father lived there it was just outside the city, Mother Burke says, a suburb, you know. Only lately the foreigners have crowded in there." Ethel's pride was natural. What girl in her circumstances would feel at ease searching for a lost brother in a colony of foreigners?

Joan chattered away, trying to make the matter appear less serious. But Ethel was not easy to divert.

"Mother Burke has promised to take him. I mean my brother, if we find him," she said. "Our only clew is that he was once in an Italian family. It seems they loved him and were good to him, and my mother allowed them to keep him," Ethel told Joan.

"There is nothing queer about that, Ethy," Joan answered. "Why shouldn't they have taken him when they were your mother's friends?"

Surely no particular nation has any special claim on friendship——”

“Charity,” put in Ethel, although that was not the word Joan would have chosen.

As the car turned into the dingy crowded streets of the unmistakable foreign colony, both girls became silent. Ethel’s eyes were already eager as they peered into the faces of little urchins who flocked around the auto every time Mrs. Burke drew up to inquire for direction. Joan too found interest in the picturesque little ones, but the quest had only just begun.

CHAPTER XV.

THE QUEST

"It seems to me," said Ethel dryly, "there's a peanut store for every family. Do they live on them?"

"Hush, dear," warned Mrs. Burke at her elbow. They were in one of the peanut stores inquiring again for old Mrs. Bianchi; the one whose son used to keep a fruit store on the corner of Seventh Avenue and Railroad Place.

The little woman with the baby in her arms was apparently most anxious to locate Mrs. Bianchi; in fact, she called in to the store Rosa, Angela and Carmel, asking them a long list of Italian questions, until finally Carmel, she with the modern American bobbed hair and the wonderful Italian dark eyes, she knew, she declared, that the Bianchis moved to the garage store behind the new station.

"Yes, there is an old lady with them," said Carmel, "a grandmother, she would be."

There were some more peanuts and some new

apples bought here, as the party would not otherwise have taken the time of the little store-keeper, and once more they got back in the car (Mrs. Benson, of course, had remained in) and brushing aside the ever curious little throng of street urchins, the way pointed out by 'Carmel was traversed.

It was not difficult to find the big garage, and tucked in under the corner of it was the tiny peanut stand and fruit store—yes, it was run by a family named Bianchi, so the boy at the box of pink soda-water bottles assured Joan.

“Could we see Mrs. Bianchi?” Joan asked.

“Sure, for what?” replied the boy. Ethel and Mrs. Burke were now coming in as Joan beckoned to them.

“We want to see her—about—a friend,” stammered Joan.

“She can't speak English good,” declared the boy. “I'll tell her.”

“But where is she? You could talk to her for us if we were—near her,” Joan continued.

“She can't walk,” objected the boy.

“Where's your mother?” asked Mrs. Burke. They were all crowded into so small a space that Ethel's coat was fairly brushing a big bunch of green bananas.

"My mother?" repeated the boy. His English was unmarked with any foreign accent.

"Yes."

"She's dead." He was grinding the peanut machine as he talked.

"Well," said Ethel, a little sharply, "isn't there any woman around we can talk to?"

"Oh, come on," ordered the lad, now leading the way through fruit truck and soda-water cases into a rear room. Ethel's demand was at last understood.

Seated by a stove they found an old woman. To her the boy spoke in Italian. After the exchange of several questions and answers, he turned to the visitors.

"She says what do you want?" he repeated.

Mrs. Burke looked hopeless. Ethel looked annoyed and only Joan seemed to understand. This was undoubtedly because her mind was not troubled with the intimate anxieties of the others. But how could they make known their business?

Finally Ethel asked the boy:

"What's your name?"

"Dominic," he replied.

"Dominic what?"

"Sattilli," he added.

"Is this woman—your grandmother?"

"Sure."

"And your mother——"

"She's dead."

"Your father?"

"No good."

Ethel paused and Joan took a hand in the questioning.

"We're looking for a little boy who used to live with old Mrs. Bianchi," she said. "Do you know him?"

"Sure, I know the kid," he declared, but it was impossible to guess whether he did or not.

"Ask Mrs. Bianchi," commanded Joan.

"I know," said the old woman. "Little boy, he go away," and her voice droned to the shaking of her shawl-covered head.

"Where?" Ethel asked. This was awful. She was sorry to have brought her adopted mother along, but she had insisted upon coming. The place was dark and crowded with everything, nothing seeming to show separately in the accumulation; just a table and endless boxes and baskets.

"Where'd the kid go?" Dominic repeated to the old woman.

"I no-know," with that melancholy tossing of her head and swaying of her body. "Your fadder, he know," the old woman said to Dominic.

"Oh, come on," snapped Ethel impatiently, "we can't find out anything here," and she started for the door.

"But Mrs. Bianchi does talk English," Joan insisted. "Just wait a minute, Ethel." She pushed aside an old stool and made her way toward the woman beside the stove. An oil stove on top of the larger one showed a dismal yellow, smoky light, and threw off a horrible odor.

Joan smiled assurance at the woman and began her line of questioning. Bit by bit she made her understand that the little boy's sister was most anxious to find him, yet she gave no hint that Ethel, standing there, with an unpleasant smile upon her face, was the sister in question.

Dominic talked to Mrs. Burke. He told her that his father worked sometimes, and came home sometimes, but he had been away "a good while just now."

"Oh, do come along." Ethel begged irritably. "I don't believe they know a thing about Buddie."

"Wait a minute," Joan insisted. "Mrs. Bianchi has told me about the gentleman who adopted him. He took him because he would

only take a child directly from a family, and an older boy who was working for this man, sort of arranged it, as I understood."

"Yes, yes, that's it," bowed the woman. "Buddie have a good home, very good home, rich, lots-a money."

"Sure," spoke up the laconic Dominic, "he's rich, all right. Rides in a big car——"

"Oh, really! Is he in a—good family?" Ethel was all interest now.

"Sure, you bet. He's got the dough, all right."

"But who is this other boy, Dominic?" Joan asked. "Couldn't we find him?"

"He works out in the country," said Dominic. "But maybe I can find him. Where do you live? I'll come tell you?"

Mrs. Burke was now trying to talk to the old lady. She wanted to know if there wasn't some other woman around who remembered Mrs. Thomas, Ethel's mother, and who would know about the baby's adoption.

"Mary, she know," said the woman. "Mary come home from shop——"

"Yeah, that right," again agreed Dominic. "Mary, she's my aunt, and she works in a shop, an' when she comes home she'll know. I'll go to your house. I've got a wheel."

This seemed as much information as could be obtained, and as Mrs. Burke was anxious about leaving Mrs. Benson so long outside, she urged the girls to hurry along while she put a dollar into the hand of the woman. Dominic was well satisfied to have sold his small basket of very ripe plums, so that presently they were all in the car once more, this time bound for home.

"But we have found something," Joan insisted to her grandmother. "I could easily tell that the old woman understood me, and she talked well enough when she didn't feel that every one was watching her. She said Mrs. Thomas had been sick a long time, and that this Italian family had always 'liked very much that baby.' That the boy, I think she called him Charlie or Carley or something like that fixed it all."

"Maybe Carlos!" interrupted Ethel.

"No, it didn't sound like Carlos, and yet, oh, wouldn't that be wonderful!" exclaimed Joan, "if it turned out to be our Carlos!"

"And if Buddie were the little boy he was shielding!" broke in Ethel. "Joan, doesn't it sound like it?" She flushed with sudden excitement, but Joan replied:

"I think the boy's name was Charley, and I'm positive I should have recognized Carlos. But

at any rate, Dominic will be sure to come out and tell us what Mary says. He and the old woman both declared she knew all about it."

"Oh, dear," sighed Ethel, her dark eyes brimming, "isn't it just awful to think——" She was not able to say more. Joan leaned kindly towards her and tried to offer assurance that everything would eventually come out right.

"I should think, dear," said Mrs. Burke, leaning back from her wheel, "that you would feel lots better. You know at least that well-to-do folks took him, and they must have been particular about family ties when they insisted that he be from a home. Some people have little faith in institutions, but"—she hurried to add this lest the remark might be taken as a reflection upon their beloved Brackin Lee—"of course, they don't really understand how carefully the records of families are kept in institutions."

"Do you suppose he is with—Italians?" asked Ethel, blinking and pressing her handkerchief to her eyes.

"They are a very loyal people, and usually cling together. I can hardly imagine Americans going into——" It was Mrs. Benson who was talking. Riding alongside of Mrs. Burke, a look of surprise was just now crossing her kind face.

"But, my dear Hattie," she said in an undertone to Mrs. Burke, "this child wasn't an Italian."

"No, that's the confusing part of it," replied the other woman too low for the girls to hear. "I'm not sure we are on the right track but Ethel is so upset," she confided. "I do hope we shall be able to learn something definite soon."

"Isn't it strange," said Ethel to Joan, "that we are both having so many remarkable things happen in our lives after our quiet times at the Lee?"

"Just shows," replied Joan, "that remarkable things are happening in the world at all times, but only those concerned know about them. Now there's Carlos. Who would ever imagine that a little working boy would have gone through as much as he has? I want to get a chance to talk with him, Ethel," Joan said very seriously. "He's an Italian and he may know these people."

"Are you going to stop at his farm now?" asked Ethel.

"I don't think I had better. You know how shy Carlos is. Besides, it is rather awkward to call for a boy who is busy."

"He might be just in the act of feeding the pigs," said Ethel, with her droll humor. "And I believe pigs are fussy about being interrupted at meals. You recall, don't you, Joany, the day

that the big, black pig was eating a couple of gooseberry bushes for lunch, and Mildred *tried* to interrupt. That was what happened to her blue organdie."

Just then Mrs. Burke asked Joan if she wished to stop at the Livalong Farm, but Joan had decided against that, pigs or no pigs, so Tillie's orders for groceries were taken under consideration instead.

In the back of Joan's turbulent mind a thought was persisting.

"I must have a talk with Carlos," was the gist of it.

And as such things usually happen, Norma's plans were prone to interfere with its immediate action.

When they reached home Norma was more than ever the beautiful cameo girl, for she had just received a message informing her that Bobbie was en route. In fact the message was much more definite than that, for it said, plainly, that he would arrive at Roamwood on the six o'clock train, Eastern Standard time.

"Land sakes alive!" whispered Ethel to Joan, as Norma proclaimed the news to the arriving auto party. "Come on over to our house and avoid the rush."

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"I can't, Ethy. I must help entertain," said Joan wistfully. But to entertain Norma's Bobbie was not a pleasant prospect for Joan.

Yet, there was apparently no way of avoiding it.

"At any rate I'm glad he's coming when the tea-room is closed," was her one consoling thought, as she followed Norma into the house and quieted Tillie's demand with the bag of groceries.

"More company!" growled Tillie. "But you needn't expect me to make toast for *him* too. Baby food is bad enough——"

"Hush, Tillie!" begged Joan. "He won't want toast. Most men like—beef-steak."

"I've got lamb stew for supper or dinner, if you want to call it that," replied Tillie, biting off a sprig of mint intended for sauce. "I guess lamb stew'll do the whole family, and the company too," she snapped, with full knowledge that her word would be law and the lamb stew would be served up to Bobbie.

CHAPTER XVI

COMPLICATIONS

NORMA looked lovely. Her glorious golden hair was piled up in its curly mound, with the little steps of waves and ringlets running up from her white neck, and her eyes now seemed gray, although Joan always thought them blue. But perhaps that was because her silver and gold gown (the only "dressy" dress she had brought along) gave a soft liquid gray tone to her eyes and made her look more than ever like a cameo girl.

Joan was fascinated with the effect, and as she now sat in the simple long, low bed-room, that which Norma had chosen because of its quaintness, watching her cousin put the inexplicable touches to her toilette, Joan secretly wondered would Norma dare to elope!

"I'm as fluttery as—a baby," laughed Norma. "Of course, little girl, you have never had any experience, but do you know," she paused. Then continued: "I'll tell you something."

The cloudy little scarf flew about her, as she dropped to the window bench beside Joan.

"First, I'm glad Bobbie didn't get here for dinner," she declared. "I'm just as interested as you are, or almost so, in the Homestead, and I don't want to add any more complications. For instance, I know that Tillie must not be vexed, as she calls it. It's lots easier to keep her in good humor than to put her in it."

"You have helped me so much, Norma——" Joan began.

"But you never can guess how much you have helped me." Norma's hand tightened on Joan's and Joan feared the tragedy of some very strong emotion behind it. She was now more worried than ever about Norma's plans.

"You see," said Norma, after a long pause, "I am a dreamer. I *love* romance——"

"So do I," admitted Joan frankly.

"But *you* only read about it and dreamed about it. I don't believe you ever would dash headlong into it as I have done."

Joan shrugged acquiescence. Norma pulled down one or two of the little elastic curls that always fell about Joan's face, as she continued.

"Yes, Joany girl, before I came here I thought

being in love was great sport. I have a chum who finished school at the Hall with me, and she— Well, she's a silly. I can see that now, but I couldn't see it while I was with her. She is one of those dominating persons who makes one believe black is white, if black is Thelma's fancy at the moment."

"I know," said Joan, simply. "There were girls at the Lee exactly like that."

"And you see, my Bobbie is her Tad's special chum. We two girls were always together and the two boys were always together. Mother didn't like any of them. She considered Thelma superficial, and dad always called her a rattle-brain."

"I know I should love your dad," interposed Joan. She meant it and felt safe in saying so.

"You couldn't help it. He's a perfect love." Norma's voice was so soft it seemed to hum a tune with those words.

"Then, don't you sort of hate to do things—underhanded?" asked Joan bravely.

"I do now, Joan. I used to think it was smart. You see, that was Thelma's black and white effect," explained Norma.

Joan wondered what this admission inferred

She also wondered that Norma was not more anxious at Bobbie's apparent missing of that early train. He should have arrived long ago.

"But I perfectly hate the kind of girl who flops over to a goody-goody idea just because she's a coward," went on Norma in that same mysterious strain. "I wouldn't change my opinion unless I felt a very strong reason for doing so. Now, here, little girl, I'll just admit this much. I like your idea of doing something worth while," her voice was alive with keen interest now. "And I've had more fun out of our garden than I've ever had at all the parties and affairs that Thelma is continually fixing up," she declared earnestly.

"Perhaps I know why, Norma," Joan ventured. "You are of the real artistic temperament, and you aren't easily fooled with—with shams." Joan was going pretty deep in her argument but felt she must do something about the affair with Bobbie. "Your mother also has the artistic temperament, Mumsey says," went on Joan, "and you have it too; it's just gardens with you and music with her. But you really enjoy the naturally beautiful things."

"Yes, I guess so. And I hate ugly things,

Joan," admitted the cousin. "I wonder what you will think of Bobbie! He's by no means good-looking."

"Then he must be—brilliant," Joan said that out of sheer kindness. She felt Bobbie had to have some redeeming feature.

"I'm afraid he isn't even that." Norma's voice was lowered rather dismally with this admission.

"And, Norma," (Joan could no longer resist) "you didn't mean what you said about—about eloping, did you?"

"Oh, darling!" Two bare white arms encompassed Joan. "I just don't know what I did mean. Thelma declares she is going to run away——"

"But—she's being terribly silly, isn't she, Norma?"

"Rattle-brain. I guess dad was right."

This remark brought courage to Joan. She was quickly making up her mind that, however difficult and hateful the task might be, she would have to watch for signs of Norma's possible going away. Especially now that Bobbie was coming. And if she should prepare to leave the Homestead on any pretense, Joan would just simply have to tell her grandmother of her fears.

There could be no other way safe, and even that didn't seem very safe to the disturbed and perplexed Joan just now.

Ethel was right when she said the more people one mixed up with the more one found to do, thought Joan. And that line of reasoning forced Ethel's own troubles back into their place in Joan's mind. It was only a flash, but in the instant, like a powerful search light, the one thought revealed the entire field of Ethel's search for the little brother Buddie.

"There's a car!" exclaimed Norma, jumping up and giving one more glance in the small looking glass. "I'll go down."

"It may be Ethel," suggested Joan. But she did not offer to run down and find out.

Mrs. Benson, who now walked out each evening, was gone on one of her solitary jaunts; Tillie was out back getting catnip for Esmeralda, and she had taken Puffy along to scare off the hoptoads. At least this was the reason she gave for taking out the little brown poodle, but any one could have seen she actually enjoyed doing it, as she naturally petted all animals.

Norma was now at the front door, and Joan was at the top of the stairs when she heard the expected greeting.

"Oh, hello, Bobbie!"

"He's come!" gasped Joan, running back to her own room with as much embarrassment as if she had been the one expected to meet the stranger. "I wish, oh, I do wish Ethel would come over," she murmured excitedly.

She felt sure that a crisis had arrived. She feared for Norma. How could any one tell, Joan wondered, whether they were in love or not? And was it possible that Bobbie might influence Norma to run away with him?

A call! It was Norma!

"Yes, Norma, I'll be down." That was Joan answering.

She gave another quick glance in her mirror. Glad she had put on the embroidered voile; glad her hair wasn't too wild (she rearranged her combs); glad the evening was partly over, but sorry Ethel hadn't come. Then she stalked down to the living room.

As she stood before the door she gained an impression of a man in dark clothes—queer, she instantly thought, for summer-time. Also, as he stood up to greet her at Norma's presentation, Joan saw great horn-rimmed glasses, and hair slicked down as if with shoe-blackening. No, he wasn't good-looking, at all.

Bobbie was sort of lisping a tangled drawl in accepting the introduction, and Joan was instantly glad Ethel had *not* come. She would have laughed outright. How could Norma bother with such a boy? But Joan must smile and be polite. She tried both feats under difficulties.

"Missed my train, a couple of them. However does one travel to these remote regions?" drawled Bobbie superciliously.

"You're spoiled, Bob," said Norma, taking her seat beside him on the big couch. "You can't expect to be shot out of a gun from the commonplace city into the Garden of Eden."

"Garden of Eden! That's good. And for you, Norma, I'll say it's very good. Now, Miss Joan, Cousin Joan, isn't it? Your place is, of course, charming. I didn't mean to insinuate otherwise."

Joan wanted to run. She had never before heard a human being talk so foolishly and seem to mean it. But she chimed in bravely.

"It is rather hard to get a train out at this hour," she admitted. "And you had to change at Briarlea?"

"Yes, exactly, Briarlea. Where do they get the names? Station agent there was indulging in a wireless entertainment between trains."

"Oh, I know him!" exclaimed Joan. "He is very—accommodating," she floundered, remembering the telephone message that this agent had sent on behalf of Skip, and glad to recall it to make talk with the strange young man, stranger even than fiction.

"But you should have come earlier," pouted Norma. "I especially wanted you to see our lovely garden, Bobbie, before the end of twilight."

"Yes, of course. I should have liked to. But the fact is, Norm, I'm off *all* gardens. Going in for hard work at drama. Can't tell of course, how I'll make out, but I had to see a man before I left. That was what delayed me." And this was but the introduction to a lengthy and tiresome account of his plans, intentions and hopes in the way of dramatic achievement!

Joan wondered how Norma could occasionally smile. It was so awfully tiresome. And he lisped and patted his hair, and kept pulling at his collar, and shifting the big horn-rimmed glasses, as if the ordeal were quite as painful for him as for his listeners. Surely Norma must have had a very bad attack of romantic fever when she "fell in love" with such an egotist, thought Joan.

And she was just about to excuse herself when

she heard the familiar and welcome toot from Mrs. Burke's car.

"Oh, there's Ethel," she exclaimed. "I must run out—to—her——"

"Fetch Ethel in," lisped Bobbie gayly. "I think I should like to meet a girl named Ethel."

Joan looked slyly at Norma as she passed out to answer Ethel's call, and it seemed to Joan that Norma was not exactly happy, in spite of all her anticipation for this visit. Dismay, if not disapproval, seemed to cloud her cousin's fine features, Joan thought.

"Let's go out and see what we can still see of the garden, Bobbie," proposed Norma. "Also, we shall find Aunt Laura. I'll see you later, Joan," she called after the escaping one, and when Ethel bounced up on the porch Joan grabbed her hands and bounced her down again before Ethel had had a chance to protest.

"Come around to the swing," Joan said, breathlessly. "I'm so glad you came."

"So am I," replied Ethel. "But why drag me away from the company?"

"Oh, come along, Eth," begged Joan. "I've got a headache or I'm going to get one and I need the air."

"Oh, that being the case, help yourself," said

Ethel dryly. "There's more here than I need. But isn't that Norma floating off toward the pond?"

"Lake," corrected Joan. "Yes, it is. Ethel, hold my hand," she added facetiously. "I'm so nervous—no fooling, Ethy," she corrected her mood, "I've had a bad half hour. I'm so glad we're too young to—have beaux."

"Glad *we're* too young! I like that. You needn't worry about me, child. I've decided to be an old maid. But——" Ethel paused and Joan knew she was not making this hurried call without reason. "You see, little sister," she continued presently, "Mother Burke had to go in to the village for dad, and I came over to tell you that the boy, you know the Italian boy Dominic, says he has found the other boy who knows about Buddie."

"Really, Ethel! Has he been over to your house already?" exclaimed Joan.

"Yes, he came in on his wheel a little while ago. And, Joan, now don't jump out of your skin or choke or do anything foolish, but Dominic says the boy's name, he who knows all about Buddie, is Carlos Torrello!"

"Ethel!"

This was, indeed, a startling surprise, and the

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following five minutes found the two chums locked in each other's arms, speechless with hopes and expectations for the final discovery of the whereabouts of little Buddie Thomas, while Norma and her friend were lost in the scenery surrounding the Homestead.

CHAPTER XVII

A DREAM DISPELLED

THE chums were so absorbed in the interest of their discovery, they almost forgot that Norma and Mr. Bobbie must be soon coming back from their stroll. In fact, not until the dim twilight outlined the two figures sauntering down the long, box-wood hedged path, that led from the little hill-top to the Homestead, did either of them realize the nearness of the young folks.

"There they come!" whispered Joan.

"Do you like him?" asked Ethel, straining her neck to catch a glimpse of the stranger.

"Wait——"

Voices floated on ahead. Norma was tossing her glorious head from one side to the other in that imperious fashion both girls easily understood as denoting defiance.

"They'll come right by here," remarked Ethel.

"Let's sneak inside."

"We can't now. Wait——" cautioned Joan in a whisper.

But while the two who were approaching could not see the girls in the swing, because of the vine-screen that hid them, Ethel and Joan could now easily see them, in the open pathway. Norma was sending forth a light, reckless, insincere, little laugh, sort of mocking whatever it was the echo of.

"It's perfectly all right," the girls heard her say. "And of course I entirely agree with you, Bobbie, you must——" The remainder of the sentence was lost in Norma's direct attention to her companion. She was insisting that Bobbie must do something very important.

"Of course you know how it is, Norm," replied Bobbie. "And I think you've got pretty good ideas——"

"Thanks," said Norma crisply.

They were almost in line with the porch. Ethel was peering over Joan's head to get a better look at the young man. She got it! With a violent fling of her heavy weight against Joan's helpless form she groaned.

"Oh, the gawk! Looks like a movie comic man——"

"Hush!"

Choking back gulps of her opinion she succeeded in swallowing them with great difficulty,

for Ethel was a girl given to free emotions. Just now Bobbie was the funniest thing she had ever seen. And she wanted to shout about it.

They were passing the porch. Ethel pinched Joan's arm cruelly. Joan didn't dare move. Norma had Puffy in her arms and she appeared to be very affectionate with her pet. Poor little dog, being made a target for nerves, thought Joan.

"Quite an old timer," remarked Bobbie, taking a look at the Homestead as they walked along. "But how do you stand it, Norm?"

"I love it here!" Norma's voice was raised in eloquence. "I've never had a lovelier time than in this past month," she declared. "I believe I'll study landscape gardening——"

"Why not—farming!"

This all but caused Ethel to protest, but they were past presently and Joan was glad of it.

"The idea," she couldn't help whispering into Ethel's ear, which was still "cocked" in astonishment. "Making fun of our place——"

"He would," declared Ethel. "And if he ever stopped making fun of other things—just imagine what he might do to himself!"

As Norma did not call for Joan or her Aunt Laura, it seemed to Joan at least, that she should

not further intrude upon the company. Ethel simply didn't want to meet the young man. After Joan's polite suggestion that they "go around front" Ethel declared she would surely "make a fool of herself and disgrace the family" if she attempted to make the acquaintance of the "comic sheet."

"Why!" gasped Joan, now realizing he was going. "There he goes!"

"Good riddance!" chanted Ethel glibly. "Perhaps it's the wisest thing he ever did."

"But, Ethel, you don't—understand. He was—that is——" She checked herself just in time. It seemed best not to mention Norma's alleged engagement.

"Say," said Ethel, following Joan toward the front door along the semi-circle porch, "don't you think that was rather a dull party? Or do you suppose he is so busy he couldn't wait to meet the folks?" she sneered.

"I don't know," replied Joan abstractedly. "But Norma has gone inside——"

"And here comes the Burke flivver," remarked Ethel happily, as a familiar honk sounded along the road. "I'll run along, Joany. And I'll phone back if Moms has heard anything about Carlos. She was going to inquire at the Post Office. She

thought the folks from Livalong Farm possibly got their mail in the village."

"Do you have to go right off, Ethel?"

"Sorry, but I really must, dear?" Ethel did a rare thing for her—flecked the merest brush of a kiss on Joan's cheek. "Besides, you must go in to Norma. I'm suspicious about her state of mind."

"All right, Ethy. Do phone me if you hear anything. And I too am a little anxious about Norma. There's Mumsey talking to her——"

"And there's Momsey honking the horn hoarse for me. Good-by, I'm happier already," and the way Ethel pranced off fully bore out that statement.

To her astonishment Joan found Norma literally in her aunt's arms. She was sobbing and evidently trying to repress a persistent outburst of weeping. As Joan entered and showed her surprise her grandmother motioned with the hand flung across Norma's shoulder, and Joan understood.

"I feel so—so humiliated," sobbed Norma. "To think I should have been such a fool."

"Now, dear, here's Joan," soothed her Aunt Laura, "and I suspect she feels that she has a bigger problem than yours to wrestle with. After

all, Norma dear, you only did what some of your friends——”

“Friends! That’s just it, friends!” wailed Norma. Evidently more injured in pride than suffering from any other emotion. “Joan, I told you—I might even run away with Bobbie——”

“But I knew you didn’t mean it,” stammered Joan, confused and not a little embarrassed.

“I did, too, mean it,” cried Norma. “I thought it would be a great thing to do. And I wouldn’t listen to mother——” She sat up painfully straight and looked fixedly at the ring on her finger. “Here,” she said, slipping it off and holding it out to Joan. “Joan, please take this. I never want to see it again——”

“But shouldn’t you give it back——”

“It was mine. That simpleton couldn’t get enough money together to buy a ring,” she burst out in answer to her Aunt Laura’s unfinished question. “Oh, dear me!” and she beat the sofa pillow impatiently. “I don’t think there can be anything more horrible than hating one’s self. Please, Joan, take the ring.”

“But I couldn’t,” demurred Joan. She was gazing unbelievably at the offering. “What ever would I do with a diamond ring?”

“Wear it, of course, or keep it until you are

older," replied the excited Norma. "For my part——" She suddenly looked directly into the soft eyes of Mrs. Benson. "Aunt Laura," she said, "tell me the truth. Did mother send me here to be—cured?"

"Cured?" repeated her aunt quizzically. "My dear child, your mother was anxious about you. You have been thrown into the company of older girls and girls, it seems, who have little interest in what we call ideals. You see," she took the hand that still held the unpopular ring, and fondled it kindly, "there is so great a difference in training. While you are eighteen years old you are a—baby in many ways."

"And I thought——" Norma bit an already punished lip. "If you had preached to me, I suppose I should have bolted, even run off, just to be smart," she admitted. "But even Joan didn't tell you I had threatened to—elope."

Again Joan smiled confidently. "I was sure that couldn't happen," she said simply. "Elope!" That word was filled with scornful incredulity. "Just imagine *you eloping*."

"I don't want to imagine it now, or ever," flung back Norma. "But, Aunt Laura, you haven't told me, whose plan it was for me to come here. Was it dad's?" she demanded.

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"Really it was no one's plan," insisted the rather perplexed woman. "As I was saying, you seemed to have acquired rather a lot of sentimental ideas, and naturally there is always one way to rid one's self of that sort of thing."

"What way, Mumsey?" asked Joan, curiously.

"By devoting one's self to an entirely different line of thought and choosing a line in which one has a natural interest."

Both Joan and Norma looked their question.

Mrs. Benson continued: "Norma has always wanted to turn a wilderness into a beauty-spot and so——"

"The garden!" exclaimed Joan. "That was why."

"Yes. Your father, Norma, was positive a single month of wholesome life with girls of your own class would do more for you than the enforced trip abroad——"

"Oh, that was it," said Norma evenly. "They were going to make me go to Europe."

"I'm so glad they didn't," murmured Joan, tossing a rose bud she had been playing with into Norma's lap. "I would have missed the best part of my garden of adventure——"

"But you haven't asked me what happened. Don't you want to know?" Norma inquired. She

had quite recovered her poise now, and was biting complacently upon the little rose bud. Her Aunt Laura had taken the despised ring.

"I suppose we have almost—guessed," replied her Aunt, "and I'm sure we don't want you to recall anything unpleasant."

"Oh, it wasn't really unpleasant. Just funny, too funny for words," Norma began. "You see, Bobbie is all puffed up with the idea of his own importance. He couldn't see, hear or think of anything else. What isn't he going to do? Miracles, of course. Honestly, I think the boy is—crazy."

"They always are a little, when they ponder too deeply upon one subject," said Aunt Laura gently. "That boy ought to go back to High School."

"Yes, and he only stayed two weeks at summer college," said Norma. "Oh, well," she sighed, "I guess I was as bad as he was, just swallowing up all his silly verses as if they meant me, when they really meant his writing dream."

Even Joan guessed how Norma's pride had been hurt, but she was glad to see her cousin's quick reaction to sensible reasoning.

"I'll admit to my folks," Norma said, "that the cure was wrought through the new method.

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I perfectly despise a girl who can be—bamboozled,” she declared defiantly. “The way you folks did it was the only way for me. Joan, didn’t you hate finding me here? Wasn’t I awfully in the way at first, just at first?” she pressed, smiling over what remained of her troubled shadows.

“We would never have been able to run either the garden or the tea-room if you hadn’t been here,” Joan declared, earnestly. “You see, we were only country girls, and we didn’t know the first thing about what we imagined would be just a lark. We’ve already made almost as much as we had hoped to make during the whole summer, and we all know it was the fame of the garden that attracted tea-room patronage. We couldn’t possibly run one of the tea-rooms we dream about, but no one could dream about a more alluring garden.”

For Joan, with her simplicity, this sounded, as Ethel would have said, “pretty good,” and it seemed the very thing needed to rid the air of the unpleasantness of the late caller.

“What shall I do with the ring?” asked the gentle lady who ever stood ready to protect the girls around her.

“Please, please keep it,” begged Norma. “Per-

haps Joan will put it on when she wants to be—different, but I know very well diamonds are not the sort of stones for darling little Joany.”

“Oh, Norma,” protested Joan.

“And while we are having this demonstration,” continued Norma in measured tones, “I just want to tell you something. I’m glad I’m no longer engaged. It was an awful lot of worry.”

CHAPTER XVIII

OUT OF THE RAIN

THE week following Norma's dismissal of the conceited Bobbie was a long week indeed at the Homestead. First, there had been the long promised party from Brackin Lee when Miss Lawrence, the beloved house-mother, piloted over from the little mountain retreat fifteen of the girls, including, of course, those who had been the particular friends of Joan and Ethel.

The day proved all too short in which to enjoy the luxuries of the fairy-garden and the tea-room, the latter being really turned into an ice cream parlor for the occasion. Rose, Marion, Grace and Elinor among the older girls seemed, for the day at least, to have been free from all the little criticisms with which they had once delighted in teasing Joan, and confronted with the joys of the Homestead, they were willing enough to agree that Joan, and even the irresponsible Ethel, had indeed achieved success.

In charge of their particular care-taker, Miss

Clark, the younger children could scarcely be "dragged away" at the day's end, for little Clara-bel and Jeanie, Joan's pets, could see no good reason why they should not remain forever with "Yonie at her pretty place, where her mamma lived."

It had been a real excursion and was followed by a real picnic. But the day ended, and with the joy of having given joy, the Homestead girls took up again the summer enterprise and its unfailing adventure.

Norma showed continuously the relief she had admitted experiencing, when her school-girl imaginary engagement was actually disposed of. She now frolicked around as lively as Joan, and not even Ethel, with her unfailing pranks, out-did Norma in either garden or tea-room activities.

Joan's grandmother said it reminded her of the story about the little girl who declared she would love to have a cow step on her foot because it would be sure to feel so good when the cow stepped off of it.

But it had taken a little time for Norma to reach this state of relief. For days following her disappointing experience, she plainly showed the pangs of a hurt pride. Also she suffered from

that sense of self-blame, so easy to acquire and so difficult to shake off. But Time is the great adjuster of young folks' troubles, and even an humble little week can do more to soothe and comfort than can the counsel of the wisest advisor.

Norma had prevailed upon Joan to wear the diamond ring for a few days just to see how it felt, and in the interval, Joan flashed the sparkler in Ethel's eyes every chance she got, although just now Ethel was pretty busy running down clues in her search for the little brother, and even a diamond ring could not divert her.

To-day promised still another harvest for the Brackin Lee benefit, for word had come that Patsy and his grandfather wanted all the flowers that might be found in bloom; and the messenger stated that "they would be over to get them in the early afternoon." Since the day that little Patsy had unconsciously precipitated Ethel's crying spell, the child's visits to the Homestead had been few. And when he did come he sat "as still as a mouse," and only played around with the roaming glances of his big brown eyes.

No end of excitement had been caused by the discovery of the Italian boy's friend in the per-

son of Carlos, but four different trips to Livalong Farm had not as yet brought about the much desired meeting with him.

First it was Carlos' trip to market that caused the disappointment, for Ethel and Mrs. Burke had hurried off to the farm the very first morning after the Italian boy, Dominic, had brought them out the news. The next trip happened to have been made in early evening, a time Ethel thought would surely find Carlos at his place. But the man who answered their call assured Mrs. Burke that the other boys around the farm all belonged to the Scouts, and they had just induced Carlos to go to a meeting with the hope of his interest crystallizing into a desire for membership also. So that accounted for their second disappointment.

Finally Mrs. Burke left word that she and a friend would call to see Carlos on a certain afternoon, and for him to be sure to be on hand to see them.

"The truth is, Missus," said the good-natured farmer who managed the place for the Livalong people and now answered Mrs. Burke's call, "I believe your message just scared that lad off. He's the queerest fellow I ever see. Runs from

a stranger like as if he was an escaped convict. He's gone and I'm sorry to say I can't locate him."

At this Mrs. Burke all but turned away from the task of finding Carlos. She declared to Ethel that she would find some other way of verifying, if possible, the boy Dominic's statement, although as things were going, she had little faith in the whole story. She did not say, however, that she feared the little boy might have died, as some one had hinted on one of her earlier trips of investigation.

Mrs. Burke was a true mother to Ethel, loved her dearly and was willing to do much for her happiness. Also she recognized the character value this new-found love of Ethel's was working out for her, but finding the small boy, who apparently had been adopted as a baby and was now far removed from the good folks who had first undertaken his care, was a task difficult and perplexing.

Just now it was indeed discouraging. Nothing but the importance of her presence at the Homestead on these last of the season's big sales days, had kept Joan out of the quest, but her faith in Carlos was as staunch as ever.

So to-day was the day of the extra flower or-

der, and just now, at eleven o'clock, a big black storm loomed up in the West, sending a reckless wind on ahead to prepare the way of onslaught.

"Come on, Tillie!" called Joan. "We must all help Norma gather the flowers before the rain. You go for the phlox—here's the scissors and the basket. Mumsey, could you cut off the rambler roses there by the porch? Wait, Norma, I'm going down to get the wild asters near the lake. My! how that wind howls!"

"It will ruin all our flowers!" wailed Norma. "Oh, Joan, I wish we had gathered them earlier."

But there was no time now for lamentations, for one of those mid-day storms was coming as fast as the wind could carry it along, and not even the clothes-basket, into which Norma and Joan were tossing the flowers as fast as they could clip them off their stems, was strong enough to withstand the already furious gale. The basket turned over like a piece of paper just as Joan had tossed into it her most beautiful spray of pink and white gladioluses.

"Oh, they'll be ruined! We've got to run back!" she cried. "Norma, come! Oh!"

Crash went the first burst of thunder that followed a flash of lightning vivid even in the daylight, against the black green of the trees.

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This was enough to drive the girls with their recovered flowers back toward the house, and just as they reached the little path that forked from the road-drive to the house, they encountered a horse.

"Skip!" yelled Joan, almost dropping her hold on the basket in her excitement, "and Carlos!"

The bursting of a cloud sent down a torrent of rain, which at the moment added to the girls' excitement.

"Come on in, Carlos!" yelled Joan. "Drive Skip around to the back shed! Here, this way."

Tillie now came running down from the porch and without her usual arguments, simply grabbed up the clothes-basket of blooms and made away with it. In another moment both girls were under shelter of the porch.

"It's Carlos and Skip," Joan cried out gleefully to her grandmother. "And did you see Skip, Mumsey?" she continued. "How fat and fine he is."

Tillie had hurried back and now stood before them.

"I'll look after the horse," she announced authoritatively. "I guess I'm the only real farmer around here," she added, with a quick

look at Norma, who received the challenge with a frank peal of laughter.

"All right, Tillie," she agreed. "But when it comes to horses——"

"Oh, I suppose you can sit up straight on one and look pretty," sneered Tillie, "but that ain't my idea of takin' care of a horse. Joany, I suppose this is the animal you've been promisin' me," she added sharply.

"Yes," gulped Joan, trying to swallow her surprise, "that's the one I've been telling you about," she tried to correct Tillie. "But let's get Carlos in out of the rain. He mustn't stay out in the shed with Skip."

Tillie ran on before them and was presently talking to Carlos and quite expertly patting the surprised Skip.

"Thought you said he was old and thin?" she charged Joan, as the latter, with Norma and Mrs. Benson, appeared at the door leading under cover from the kitchen to the shed. "Why, this is a fine horse; fine points," she declared, looking over the animal as critically as a prospective buyer might be expected to have done.

"You bet!" agreed Carlos pridefully. "He's an all right horse now. Thing that ailed him mostly was his shoes."

"His shoes!" repeated Norma, in a questioning tone.

"Yes s'm," said Carlos, jerking off his wet cap. "You see, his shoes were too small, and put on wrong and they pestered him until they got him to be just skin and bone. But we fixed him all right now. And I came——"

A roar of thunder drowned the remainder of the sentence.

"Land sakes alive!" shrieked Tillie. "Come into the house. Horses draws lightning worse than anything," and she crowded past Joan and Norma, literally tumbling up the steps in her haste to get into the kitchen.

"Come inside, Carlos," said Mrs. Benson kindly. "I know you are the boy Joan has talked so much about."

"Yes s'm, thank you," stammered Carlos, but his coat of tan was so thick there was no danger of any flush or blush showing through, although his embarrassed manner indicated the possibility of both.

"We've been trying to find you for more than a week," declared Joan. "We've been over to the farm——"

"It wasn't you who came!" Carlos' exclama-

tion betrayed him. He must have known that some one had called at the farm but he seemed positive it could not have been Joan.

"No, I didn't go," Joan admitted, "but Ethel and her mother did."

"Oh," concluded Carlos in a relieved tone of voice.

Tillie had arranged the four kitchen chairs in a straight line in the darkest end of the room.

"Sit down here," she commanded. "It's the safest place in the house. The other rooms all have those dangerous open chimneys. Here, boy," she addressed Carlos. "Just stick your feet on that rubber mat. They're covered with mud."

"I just came in from the fields," apologized Carlos, "and I was in too much of a hurry—to brush up."

"That's perfectly all right," Norma told him. "You should see *our* shoes after we've been out gathering flowers early mornings."

All this time Joan was wondering why Carlos had come. She knew his shyness would prevent him from making known his errand before the others, but just now she could see no way of getting him away from them. Her grand-

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mother, however, was more resourceful, and she led the way into the long hall, away from Tillie's "perfectly safe" kitchen.

"There's more air in the hall," she said. "Tillie's range fire is a little warm for to-day—it is always so close during a shower. Joan, take Carlos into the hall, dear. Norma and I will put your flowers off the porch where they will get the last drops of rain. It will keep them fresh for the afternoon."

"Let me do it," promptly offered Carlos, taking up the basket of blooms and following Mrs. Benson out through the opened glass door to the side porch.

Joan gave her grandmother's arm a grateful little squeeze as she passed her, and while Norma joined her Aunt Laura outside, as the storm was now practically over, Joan motioned to Carlos to take a chair in the hall, first being wise enough to close the door that led from the kitchen.

"Carlos!" she gasped. "What is it? Has anything happened?"

"Yes. He's after me again and he can't get my horse," said the boy, his whole frame seeming to shake with a dogged determination against the very mention of any one getting his horse away from him.

"Tell me about it," urged Joan. "Don't worry. My grandmother won't let any one in here."

Then Carlos began his story.

CHAPTER XIX

A BOY'S LOYALTY

As Joan looked at Carlos in his overalls, that showed what an active little worker he must be upon the great Livalong Farm, his feet now comfortably shod in the cool and convenient brown "sneakers," and above all his personality shining out through his fine dark features (Joan thought his eyes the handsomest she had ever seen and she loved *all* dark eyes) there was that about him that bespoke character, upright and sterling, even Joan felt gladly conscious of this presentment.

"Tell me about it, Carlos," she urged. "Don't be afraid."

"Oh, I'm not afraid about *you* telling anything," he spoke up manfully. "I know you're a good friend."

Joan was proud to hear him say that, for this had all been a serious experience for her, a mere girl and just out of a private school.

"But I had to hustle and fetch Skip here," Carlos began, "because he was after him."

"Who?"

"Jake. He's supposed to be my uncle, but he isn't. I know that. He's no relation to me at all. Just a hanger-on on our family."

"Is he the man who followed you out at Hillsdale?" Joan asked.

"Yes, and he follows me everywhere. But what do you think he says now? Says he was after the horse all the time, and that if it's found out I have him I'll be arrested."

"Why?"

"He says, but I don't believe him, that he took this horse to cure him of some foot-trouble. That he belonged to a rich man and somehow, so Jake says, another fellow rode him off one day just for a lark, and Jake couldn't ever get him back again."

"And you don't think it's true, Carlos?"

"I don't think that much he says is true," replied the boy, "and it looks to me like he just wants Skip now, because he's worth something. The manager of our farm says he's worth a lot."

"And I believe he is too," agreed Joan. "A railroad man who saw him at Briarlea said he was a fine horse."

"Well, nobody can't tell *me* anything about

Skip," declared the boy affectionately. "And he was just as kind and gentle when he was bony as he is now. He was always a good friend to me, and no Jake is going to get him, if I can help it——"

"That's the way to feel about it, Carlos," said Joan, admiring the display of loyalty. "But you see, if Jake's story is true, he could be arrested if it were found the horse——"

"That's just it. He says he had to tell the owner that he died, when he couldn't find him after the fellow ran off with him and left him to wander away. And you see, Joan," (he always paused after he had made free enough to use her name,) "one could always tell if this is the right horse 'count of the mixed hairs in his fetlocks."

"Oh, yes, I know. The whiskers on his heels," Joan recalled, with a little laugh. "But you want to leave him here——"

"If I can. If you don't mind. You said——"

"We'll be glad to have him. I like him too, Carlos, and Tillie—she's our maid—she's just crazy about a horse. I suppose she'll claim him every minute he's here. But, Carlos, I can't wait to ask you this. I didn't want to spoil your story," panted Joan, "and I don't know how to

begin mine. But, Carlos," she sat down on the chair nearest him and her serious air was by no means assumed. "Carlos," she repeated, "did you ever hear of a little boy named Buddie Thomas?"

"Buddie Thomas!" almost shouted Carlos. "Sure I did. He's the boy——"

"Carley! Carley!" cried Joan, grabbing the boy's short sleeve and jerking at it wildly, in her excitement. "Carley! That's the boy! That's the boy we are all looking for!"

"Who's looking for Buddie?" he asked, his manner changing instantly to one of defiance.

"Why, Ethel, you know, my chum Ethel. Buddie is her little brother!"

"Her brother! My Buddie! Joan, what do you mean?" Carlos was now on the excited list.

"Oh, I forgot, Carlos. Of course you haven't heard. But Ethel was separated from her family when she was very small, and this baby brother went with strangers——"

"He went with my mother, Buddie Thomas did," declared Carlos, in that defiant way a boy has of saying a thing positive beyond all question.

"With your mother? Say, Carlos, can't I ask Mumsey in to hear? And Norma——?"

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"Sure, I'd trust any of you folks, but I've got to get—back——"

"Wait just a minute," begged Joan. "Come on out here," she had thrown open the door into the dining room which was still held private against all tea-room invaders, and in a few words Joan explained the situation to her grandmother and Norma. Then the boy went on with the remarkable story.

"Can you believe it?" gasped Joan. "His mother had Ethel's little brother——"

"That's why I always had to run away from Jake," burst out Carlos. "You see, we are all Italians and this boy wasn't. But his mother was my mother's best friend, and *I* promised Buddie's mother *I'd* never let him go into an orphan's home, and I didn't."

"That was the promise you made to the woman?" said Joan half in question. "Don't you know, Carlos, you told us out at Hillsdale that you had to keep a promise to a woman?"

"Did I? I don't remember," said the boy, dismissing the growing compliment of loyalty to a worthy cause.

"You are a brave boy, Carlos," spoke Mrs. Benson in her calm way. "I understand, I think.

"You allowed some one to adopt the child from your home?"

"Yes, s'm, that's it. And that's why Jake was always holding it over me," said Carlos a little sullenly.

"Why?" demanded Joan. There was still a mystery in the story.

"Because the man thought Buddie was ours and he wasn't," admitted Carlos.

"What difference would that make?" asked Norma.

"Lots," snapped Carlos, bitterly. "Jake said he'd turn him back to me, I mean the man would, if he found out Buddie wasn't our own."

"Oh, my dear child!" exclaimed Mrs. Benson, "this man Jake has been deceiving you. No one adopts a child legally without knowing every particular of his parentage. That fellow has——"

"Been holding a club over your head," chimed in Norma, who appeared better versed in the vernacular than was her Aunt Laura.

"That's just it, Carlos," Joan spoke up. "He said all that to frighten you into giving him your good money."

"I'll bet he did," admitted the boy sourly. "But I didn't used to know, when I was a kid

——” He stopped but the look on his face spoke for him. It was an admission that the fellow Jake had been deceiving a small boy named Carlos.

“But anyhow, before you tell us all the rest,” interrupted Joan, “do tell us, quickly, Carlos, where is Buddie Thomas?”

“I don’t know.”

“Don’t know! Why? Where was he last?” Dismay now possessed the excited Joan.

“Last I knew he was—going to Europe!”

“Oh!” Joan’s face fell to the look Ethel always described as “half-mast.” This announcement from Carlos had sounded like the tolling of a bell. “Gone—to—Europe!” she repeated blankly.

“Why, that’s nothing,” scoffed Norma. “We all go to Europe and come back—when the season is over. Aren’t my folks there now?”

“Yes, I know,” stammered Joan, “but it would be so hard to—find him—in Europe.”

Even Mrs. Benson smiled broadly at this. But she left her chair and laid her very slender hand on Carlos’ shoulder.

“My dear little boy,” she said, and the girls noticed that Carlos shrugged somewhat under the title little boy, “I’m going to phone over to your



SKIP WAS PICKING UP SPEED AT EVERY PACE.
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farm and say that you are here. Also, that you won't be back for another hour. We must get the details of this story as quickly as we can, and I'm sure you are anxious——"

"But I've got berries to pick," objected Carlos, now on his feet and apparently anxious to leave.

"Oh, let Mumsey phone," begged Joan. "We've been trying to see you for a whole week," she reminded him, ruefully.

"All right," said the boy, settling back in the wicker chair. "Mr. Morgan is good-natured. I guess he'll give me time off."

Mrs. Benson stepped over to the telephone. The shower had departed and left the world beautiful behind it, and Norma instinctively moved to the window to see how her flowers had fared. As she did so she literally shouted:

"Oh, look! Look! There goes Tillie riding your horse."

Every one flew to the window. They peered out, but quickly left the window for a better view from the porch. And sure enough, there was Skip cantering proudly around the lake-path with Tillie, Tillie the lover of animals and the incomprehensible maid, sitting very well indeed

upon his broad back, notwithstanding the lack of saddle and the hindrance of skirts.

"Good!" exclaimed Carlos, tossing his cap up and catching it in applause. "She's a good old rider, isn't she?"

"Seems to be," admitted Norma, recalling Tillie's derision of her own equestrienne powers. "Isn't it too funny? In that—old house dress?"

"I'm glad she can have a ride," said Joan a little bit too kindly. "Tillie's been good to help us, and we've given her a lot of extra work."

"Can you ride?" asked Carlos of Joan.

"I did, a little, at the Lee," replied Joan. "But we used to get on old Frank with a step-ladder."

The mirth which this provoked blended nicely with that which Tillie was providing, for she was now going at quite a canter, and Skip was picking up speed at every pace.

"Go it, boy! Go it!" called out Carlos. Not that Skip could hear him but just to show his approval.

"Doesn't she ride well?" said Mrs. Benson, who had just finished phoning, and joined the party watching Tillie's performance. "I guess, Joany, we will have to make Skip a member of the family."

"I'll tell you all about it, Mums, when we get a chance," promised Joan, "but I've got to hear more about Buddie. I want to phone Ethel——"

"I wouldn't just yet, dear," cautioned her grandmother. "It would be unwise to raise her hopes and not be able to find the little boy. If you want to go inside——"

"Please, let *me* stay here to judge the race," suggested Norma. "I'm afraid I'll have to get a horse and keep myself in trim if I don't want Tillie to walk off with all the honors."

"Whew! See her go!" called out Carlos again. "I never knew myself old Skip could go like that."

"Maybe he likes a lady rider," suggested Joan, quite innocent of the fact that this was the very thing Skip did like and was now delighting in.

As Joan and her grandmother drew the reluctant Carlos indoors to hear all he could tell them of little Buddie Thomas, they saw Tillie's figure sitting boldly upon the prancing steed that went round and round the lake-side bridle path.

"And we didn't even know we had a bridle path," commented Joan dryly.

CHAPTER XX

WHISKERS ON HIS HEELS

"I WANT to know so many things all at once they just choke me," said Joan, as if something that wasn't could be. As if she could choke on something she didn't have.

"I'll answer all the questions I can," offered Carlos generously. "Of course, I'm awfully glad that my little Buddie has a real sister like Ethel; she's a fine girl," he contributed warmly. "But then, I don't know the first way to find Buddie for her."

"What was the woman's name who adopted the boy? Do you remember that, Carlos?" asked Mrs. Benson, who was as eager as Joan to untangle the story.

"Oh, yes, s'm. I know her name. It was Volenta, and she was a great singer. Madam Celestine Volenta."

"An Italian," concluded Mrs. Benson.

"Oh, yes, she was just like us, Italian," agreed Carlos.

"But Buddie Thomas was American," interrupted Joan rather sharply.

"Yes, I know. That's what Jake always said. She'd fire him back at us if she knew he wasn't Italian," declared Carlos.

"Now you must not believe that," insisted Mrs. Benson, "because the people must have known all about his parentage when they adopted the child."

"Yes, I do understand it now," answered Carlos affably, and he kicked his heels together with a boy's show of embarrassment.

"Did Buddie look like an Italian?" Joan asked.

"Sure he did," declared Carlos. "That was what started it. He had such black hair and black eyes, folks always used to call him—you know how they call us in fun, sometimes," he floundered, being unwilling to utter the common term.

"How did the man who adopted him find him away out there?" pressed Joan. "If he was a rich man——"

"He was, and Jake worked for him first, then I delivered papers to his house," Carlos continued. "He was only a summer customer and he wasn't Italian, just the other part of the fam-

ily was," explained Carlos, growing more at ease as the story was unfolded.

"Oh, I see," said Mrs. Benson. "That may explain it. One end of the family was American, perhaps of Irish descent."

"Yes, s'm, that was it. Her father, Mrs. Volenta's father, he wasn't Italian. It was his house."

"Now, let me see. What was his name?" He thought for a moment, but could not recall.

"But he could speak Italian," the lad continued presently, "and I remember when he asked me if our folks had a little fellow to spare. Of course, I thought right away how fine it would be for Buddie."

"And you have been worrying about it ever since," reflected Joan, sympathetically.

"Oh, I knew Buddie had a swell place all right, and before Mrs. Thomas died we promised her we would look out for him. We was poor enough, but my mother——" The glory of the word gave eloquence to his unspoken tribute. Plainly his mother was a world of goodness and power in the memory of Carlos.

Joan and her grandmother did not break the silence for some minutes. Norma was racing back to the house, they heard her calling out com-

pliments to Tillie as she came, and Skip's unmistakable patter on the gravel path made known that at least one trial race had been finished.

"We must have lunch," suggested Mrs. Benson.

"And I've got to go," declared Carlos.

"Oh, no, you must stay," Joan quickly insisted. But as she did so she caught an appealing glance from the boy's dark eyes.

"If you don't mind," he said humbly, "I've got to go. I'll send out the feed for Skip——"

Tillie poked a proud but disheveled head in at the door.

"Guess I can ride a horse as good as the next one," she boasted. "And, young fellow, when you want to sell that one, let me know. He's just a first rate trotter, and my father always allowed I was as good a judge of horse flesh as he was hisself."

This boast was left unchallenged, and Tillie went off to prepare the belated lunch. Joan could scarcely hold back her impatience to call Ethel on the phone, and she was now feeling almost guilty to have heard so much of Carlos' story and not to have imparted it to her who was most keenly interested. But her grandmother still urged her to wait until they could

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find some tangible clew to the child's whereabouts.

"Is there no one who could remember the gentleman's name?" she asked. Carlos was now about to start off.

"Yes; Jake knows it," he replied frankly.

"No one else?" Joan urged. "We don't want him to get mixed up in it."

"Maybe some of the folks out Italy way," suggested Carlos vaguely.

"You mean the place we went to?" Joan asked. "Oh, no; nobody knows out that way. We've tried everything there and only Dominic's grandmother seemed to understand."

"That isn't *his* grandmother," contradicted Carlos. "She's mine. And she's—all right."

"You mean she's a good woman? Of course she is, Carlos," agreed Joan. "And we'll go out there again soon. Perhaps we can do something for her."

"Know what I heard?" asked Carlos suddenly. "Your aunt out in Hillsdale has fixed it up for Libby Kane to go in the Old Ladies' Home!"

"Really!" exclaimed Joan. "Aunt Alice hadn't told us about it yet, but she wrote she expected to."

"If you folks is goin' to eat to-day," ordered

Tillie, whose face was either flushed from her ride or from an unusually hot fire, as she presented herself, "I think you had better set in."

"Wait just a minute, Tillie," Norma tarried.

"Wait! Yes, wait! And in a few minutes you'll be hearing folks pounding on those tables out there for tea. Yes, they'll be yelling all kinds of tea to once, and I'll be expected to turn it on like turning on the kitchen sink." Of course she meant faucet, but sink was her favorite expression and so she expressed it.

"Tillie is right, my dears," said Mrs. Benson agreeably, "and we have no more time to spare. Carlos, I'm sorry you can't stay."

"I'll just run around and say good-by to Skip," concluded Carlos, "and say, I'll tell you" (this was to Joan) "I'll be out with the team this afternoon and then I can fetch the feed. I've got a lot on hand. You see, we've been feeding him up good."

"Yes, we see," answered Joan with a laugh. "And we also see that it has been doing him good. It's well for us, however, or rather for our tea-room trade, that Skip doesn't take soup and pudding, or I fancy Tillie wouldn't have much more time to spare for the benefit of Brackin Lee."

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At that Carlos hurried off and the family immediately "set in" for their lunch.

"I've been wanting to tell you," said Joan's grandmother, as they were beginning on Tillie's tomato soup, "that Margaret and Roger are having a wonderful time and are coming back about the middle of September. I had a letter in the early mail."

"Of course, in September," complained Joan. "Just when school starts and I'll be too busy to have a lot of fun."

"Going to High School?" asked Norma. "I almost wish I were just beginning."

"Oh, no, you don't, Norma," contradicted Joan slyly. "Just think what a lot of bother you would have going through all that Bobbie business again."

"That's so," agreed the cousin, accepting the teasing as Joan had intended it. "But then, too, I would be coming here again. And think of all the fun that would be."

"You win," agreed Joan. "But say, Mums, don't you think my boy Carlos is a—a—dandy?" she ended, giving the last word an accent that assigned it to Ethel's vocabulary.

"Indeed I do," said Mrs. Benson warmly, ignoring the slang and accepting its intention.

"That is one of those examples of a boy's absolute devotion to a promise, even when the promise was made before the lad should have understood such things. You see, Carlos had promised Buddie's mother to look after him, and no amount of threats from this other fellow, whom he calls Jake, could dissuade him from the course he felt he was obliged to follow. Of course, the man knew that, and as Norma says, he held the club over Carlos' head."

"Horrid old thing!" declared Joan. "But say, Norma, Patsy and his grandfather will be here before we have time to change our dresses. Are the flowers all right? Not all beaten to pieces by the rain?"

"It did them good. You should see my glorious box of American Beauties," exclaimed Norma. "I put them all long stemmed, just as the florists do, in the box we got our paper tablecloths in. Oh, they're a dream!"

"I'm glad, because they have always been so generous—Patsy and his grandfather—and he wanted them for some one's birthday," said Joan. "I think it's Patsy's mother's. Well, we've had some adventures to-day!" she sighed. "I feel as if I had just returned from a tour around the world."

Still teasing for permission to tell Ethel, Joan succeeded in getting it to the extent of asking Ethel over for the afternoon, and following that she pranced around like a young colt, said Tillie, getting ready for the afternoon's business.

But a girl can do a great deal in an hour when she wants to, and in less than that time both Joan and Norma were "all dolled up and waiting for customers," again according to Tillie.

Nor had they long to wait, for the rolling in of a handsome car presently proclaimed the arrival of the popular little Patsy and his distinguished-looking grandfather. They seemed as glad to arrive as the Homestead folks were to receive them.

"Got them? Got them?" demanded the child. "They're for my mother's birthday and we want packs of them."

"And we've got them," answered Joan, giving the boy a little hug as he danced around her. "Norma's got perfect beauties; zinnias, roses and gladioluses, and even big red poppies, although you can hardly touch the poppies," she turned to say this to the man who stood beside her. "We didn't mind taking a few of the very loveliest right by the roots."

"Trees!" cried Patsy, clapping his chubby hands. "They've got us whole flower trees! Won't muddy be s'prised?"

"What girls you are!" proclaimed the fine-looking man, as he stood up, cap in hand, admiring the display of open boxed blooms that Joan and Norma had led him to, at the shady side of the long old-fashioned house. "To think what you have done with this place! I'll tell you, I'm going to see that Brackin Lee doesn't forget you among its benefactors," he declared, warmly.

"Oh, look, look!" cried out small Patsy. "A horse! A horse! Look! Grandpa!"

Skip had just poked his fine head out from the end of the house, where, in a small but bountiful patch of grass, Tillie had kept him grazing.

"So you've got yourselves a horse," remarked the man, following Patsy around to view what the boy seemed to consider as a remarkable animal.

"He isn't ours," said Joan. "But do come and see him. He has quite a history. We call him Skip." She was chopping off these announcements like a man at a side show.

"Skip," repeated the man. "Queer name for a horse. Let's have a look at him. I used to have some good horses. My daughter——"

He stopped suddenly. They were now around where Skip stood revealed in all his glory.

Mr. Denton walked up to him without uttering another word. He looked him over critically; brushed back his mane, slapped his flanks, looked into the great brown, blinking eyes. Then he stepped back.

"Where did you get this horse?" he asked, almost solemnly.

"Why, I told you, you know," stammered Joan, "that he has a history. He is a lost horse," she concluded. "A boy whom we know found him and has been taking care of him." Joan could hardly express herself she was so confused.

"Daddy likes him, don't you, daddy?" chirped up Patsy.

"Yes, I do," said the gentleman in a very even tone. Then he stooped over to examine the hair on Skip's fetlocks. As he did so he shook his head conclusively.

"As—as I live," he declared, rising and addressing the girls, "that's my horse!"

"Your horse!" Norma as well as Joan was beaming with hopeful excitement.

"I couldn't mistake him," replied Mr. Denton. "You see this mixed hair on his fetlocks?"

"Oh, I remember that well," Joan assured him. "The boy, our friend Carlos, told us we could always tell him that way. And my chum Ethel, she always called it the whiskers on his heels!"

"Whiskers on his heels! Whiskers on his heels!" chanted Patsy. "Is he ours? Can we take him home? Where's Ethel? The other girl? The one who gives me cookies?" he demanded all in a breath like tooting a tin horn.

"She will be over later," Joan promised, still breathless from the remarkable identification of Skip. "But please do tell us, Mr. Denton. Did you give this horse to an Italian man to put out to pasture?"

"I did. And a fine fellow he was. I wanted the horse to roam around freely in the fields. He had been suffering from shoes wrongly fitted, and we were occupying a summer cottage without a great deal of ground around it. This fellow had been working for me, so I trusted him with Master." He paused to brush the horse's sides fondly. "He was my daughter's saddle horse and her one pleasure for a time. But when the fellow said he died, of course, we had to take

his word for it. Now who is this lad who found him?"

"His name is Carlos Torrell," said Joan, "and he loves Skip as any boy would love—— Why——" She paused wide-eyed to ask what it was that had startled her listener to his attitude of new astonishment.

"You said Carlos Torrell?" he asked, incredulously.

"Yes," answered Joan.

"Where can I see that boy?" demanded Mr. Denton. "I completely lost track of——Carlos."

"You know him?" exclaimed Joan.

"He will be here later in the afternoon," Norma replied, for Joan seemed struck aghast at dawning possibilities.

"Then see here, little man," he said to Patsy, "we have got to rush home with these flowers for Mother. We can't disappoint her, not even for old Master. And think! think what it will mean for her to have him back as a birthday gift!"

"Can I give him to her?" pleaded Patsy, who was now completely fascinated by the majestic beauty of the stately white horse.

"Yes, you can," declared his grandfather decisively. "Now, call Tom, and tell him to load

up. Girls," he said, turning to Joan and Norma, "I'll be back, *soon*. Hold that boy if he gets here before I do. I want to see him," and with a soldierly stride he followed Tom, the chauffeur, toward the car, helping to carry along some of the boxes of precious blooms from the girls' garden.

CHAPTER XXI

THE GARDEN OF ADVENTURE

"Do hurry, Joan. I'm as excited as I was the day I graduated from the academy and didn't know my lines. I am sure Patsy's grandfather meant something very important when he told us not to let Carlos go until he has seen him. Joan, what do you suppose the mystery is?" Norma had scarcely paused for breath during all this, but Joan took time to admire her enthusiasm.

"Really, Norma, I can't guess the riddle. I think we have done pretty well at guessing some of the others," Joan replied, making a better-looking knot of her gingham tie that was wound around her waist twice and then dangled to her knees. "Of course the horse story seems clear," she continued, "and I guessed that was right when Carlos told it and he believed the man Jake merely made it up. Perhaps Mr. Denton wants to pay Carlos well for taking such good care of Skip."

"No, I don't think that was all of it," reasoned Norma shrewdly. "You know, he just jumped at the idea of seeing Carlos again, and he wouldn't have felt as good as all that if he only intended to pay a boy some money." Norma did not ever regard mere money as a very worthwhile consideration.

"Well, we'll find out soon, if our play comes off all right," promised Joan. "I hope he brings Patsy back with him, but of course, he may have to stay to the birthday party."

"There's Ethel's honk!" interrupted Norma, jerking her overblouse into place. "She's on time, at any rate, and we'll have some telling to tell her all the story thus far."

"I wanted to have her over before lunch. I'm afraid she'll think I've been holding back. But come on! Watch her 'act up' when she hears who Skip is," suggested Joan.

"Acting up" was still another one of Ethel's own expressions, and that they could count on her to illustrate its meaning was one more of Joan's good guesses.

"Come along!" shouted Joan. "Around here. Quick, Ethy, and sit down so you won't fall." She pushed her into the big armchair on the porch, beaming her blue eyes into Ethel's sur-

prised features. "Now, don't shout or faint or anything——"

"Help!" shouted Ethel at the word. "Whatever is all the excitement about? Want me to blow up in suspense?"

"No, we don't, but, Ethel, we have good news," began Norma, quite calmly.

"Buddie?" Ethel's heart seemed in the word.

"Not just yet, but Carlos has been here——"

"What did he say, Joan? Oh, please don't make sport of—of that!"

"Why, we aren't, Ethy," Joan soothed. "I didn't intend to tell you that part first——"

"Why? Is it something too hard to know?"

"Oh, no, dear. Just listen a moment," begged Norma. She could tell the pitiful details of the little lost boy's story more dispassionately than could Joan. "It was Carlos who knew your little brother——"

"Where is he now?" demanded Ethel.

"Carlos says he was legally adopted by a wealthy family, and the last he heard they were going to Europe——"

"Oh!" It was the same dismal groan that Joan had uttered when she had heard Europe mentioned.

"Why, going to Europe doesn't mean any-

thing, Ethel," Norma assured her, just as she had assured Joan. "We come and go all the time."

"But Europe is a long way over," insisted Ethel, almost pulling the pretty organdie rose off the side of her hat.

"Now, Carlos is coming back again, Ethel, then you can ask him everything," murmured Joan. "But it was lovely to hear that he had known your mother, and that it was to your mother he had made the promise to look after the little baby boy," argued Joan.

"Yes?" said Ethel, dreamily. Her eyes were brimming and her voice betrayed the tears.

"But let me tell you about Skip," chirped Joan. "He belongs to Patsy's grandfather."

"He does? Oh, well, he's only an old horse——"

"He isn't either. But if you're not going to care, Ethy."

"Oh, of course I do care, Joan," and the brown eyes blinked bravely. "But you see *you* have got your folks——"

"And I'm positive you will find Buddie," declared Joan. "You know it just has to happen. It always does," sang out Joan confidently.

"Here's a team driving in," Norma told them.

"It's Carlos with the feed," she concluded, as the wagon rumbled in.

"Now you can talk to him, Ethel," coaxed Joan. "Come on. He's so fine about it. You know he made a lot of sacrifices——"

"But his folks didn't keep Buddie," Ethel complained, bitterly.

"Now, Ethel——"

Carlos had driven "his team" around to the shed and was already lugging at a bag of feed when Mr. Denton's car drove in.

"He's brought Patsy!" exclaimed Norma. "Now, Ethel, you can cheer up. You always love Patsy."

"Yes," sighed Ethel, "because he's like what my little Buddie ought to be." But she followed the girls out toward the car and fought back the shadows that were clouding her face.

Patsy romped up to her and grabbed both her hands. "Oh, hello!" he shouted. "Where've you been? Did you see Mummer's horse? An' have you got me some sugar cookies?"

Before she could answer Patsy's grandfather had caught sight of Carlos.

"Is that the boy?" he demanded. And seeing Joan's nod he brushed past every one and almost ran toward Carlos.

Mrs. Benson was out by the wagon. It was too distant for the girls to hear what the gentleman was saying to her and to Carlos, but it was something very exciting they could see that much.

Patsy was tugging at Ethel's hands. She had always played with him and he expected it now.

"Come on! Come on!" he begged. "See my mum's horse! It's her birthday and she's gettin' gottin', getted him back," he stammered, determined to hit upon the right but difficult word.

"Come on," urged Joan. "See what's—doing!"

"Wait a moment," explained Ethel. "Mother Burke is just parking in the shade. Here she is. Come on, Mother," she added to the repeated appeal, and the pleasant lady, with her ever-ready smile, joined in the convention being held around Skip and his bag of feed.

"What are you smiling so about, Mumsey?" instantly demanded Joan. "You know we can't wait for good news——"

Mr. Denton turned and smiled so that he included all hands in the greeting.

"Get out your pads and pencils, girls," he ordered, "and take down a modern fairy story."

Carlos was so embarrassed he seemed prone to get under the wagon he was edging up to.

"This boy," said Patsy's grandfather, "is the boy who some years ago brought into our life the ray of sunshine we call—Patsy."

"Patsy!" every one exclaimed.

"Yes. My daughter, Madam Volenta, had lost her only child, and I, knowing the demands of her heart, succeeded in finding her another. He has been a joy to us, and his name, his baptismal name, was—Justin Thomas!"

"Patsy!" shrieked Ethel, and both Joan and Norma put out a restraining hand to hold back the excited girl from literally falling upon the bewildered Patsy.

"I aren't Justin," he protested. "I are Patsy oory-iry-ay!"

"He has always declared he was going to be captain of a railway, and he has claimed the title," explained the happy man, patting the child's head.

"Oh, Mother!" burst out Ethel, now turning toward the woman who had gladly taken her as a friendless girl into her warmer happy life, "Mother Burke," she repeated, "can it be possible!"

"Now, Ethel dear," said Mrs. Burke, trying to speak calmly in spite of her palpitant emotion, "I told you to trust and wait. And you see what

a wonderful thing has come to you. To think your Buddie is really the darling little boy who fell in love with you from the beginning."

"And to think," chimed in Norma, "that Patsy chose Ethel and left me and Joan out of his favors. Doesn't it seem as if some one must have led them together?"

"Suppose we all try to compose ourselves a bit and listen to Mr. Denton. We have waited so long for the news it is rather a shock to us," Mrs. Benson faltered.

"Mumsey!" exclaimed Joan, hurrying towards her. "We have forgotten you. You are not strong enough for all this. Come, do sit down."

"I'm going to ride Master," sang out Patsy, "and this is my——"

"Carlos is your friend, indeed, Patsy," his grandfather told him. "You're a lucky little chap. Got a brand-new grown-up sister and a champion——"

But all the eloquence was being wasted on the boys, for Carlos had simply lifted the little fellow up on the big white horse, climbed up behind him and ordered Skip to trot around the lake!

"Look at them!" exclaimed Joan, who had paused in her efforts at making her grandmother safely comfortable. "Aren't boys—great!"

"Seems to me Carlos is pretty glad to see his little Buddie again," remarked Norma, watching the pair fly off on the horse.

"Hey there!" yelled Tillie, just breaking in on the scene from a kitchen door entrance. "Who's drivin' that horse like that this hot day?"

"The owner," replied Mr. Denton calmly. "And he's just showing off his stock so that I may know what I'm buying. But I'm willing to pay a good price for that particular horse."

This remark was easy to understand, but the gentleman continued:

"We'll make things right with Carlos and his people. My daughter always regretted having lost track of them."

"Was it your daughter who adopted my brother?" asked Ethel timidly.

"Yes; you see she studied music in Italy and married the Italian composer, Volenta," explained Mr. Denton kindly.

"But our folks aren't Italian," demurred Ethel, for once in her frolicsome life showing real embarrassment.

"Oh, we understood that," Patsy's grandfather answered. "And Mrs. Benson has been telling of Jake's rash threats. After all, Jake was just a foolish fellow, but he wrote a letter once about

Patsy that reached my daughter. It did disturb her and she hasn't been willing to let the boy out of my sight or her own since. But I guess she'll understand now," he concluded. "And we are giving her a glorious birthday treat. Of course, young lady" (this to Ethel), "you and your mother must come back with us——"

"Oh, we couldn't, not just to-day," objected Ethel, and every one understood how she felt about meeting Patsy's folks—just then.

"Boo-hoo! Boo-hoo!" wailed Joan, in mock dismay. "Nobody's giving me anything! Little brothers all snapped up——"

This was the signal for everybody to flock to Joan, even Ethel, now recovering from her surprise, realized how much of it she owed to her "red-headed chum."

"It was you, Joany," she declared, "who brought it all about. I never had the real love that you had for Skip, and if you hadn't followed him up, we wouldn't have found Carlos again——"

"Well," sighed Norma, "it's all very well for you two, but I'm going to claim some share of the honors in this Garden of Adventure," and she threw her arms around the happy Joan to prove her intentions.

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"Say, come here, Eth, I want to tell you," Joan whispered. The older folks were still talking around Mrs. Benson's chair. "Ethy," cooed Joan, "you haven't quite realized it, but you are going to get in real swell society through your high-toned little brother——"

"Joan Marsh! You hush!" checked Ethel, thus protesting against Joan's jolly attempt to tease her once more about her old ideas of "high-toned folks."

"But Madam Volenta is an artist," Norma reminded them. "Joking aside, girls, that *does* mean a lot."

"What you will be one day if you stick to fancy farming," insisted Joan. "Can you guess how much money we have all made for dear old Brackin Lee?"

"Don't let us guess," protested Ethel. "I'm dead tired guessing at things. Now, girls, the famous steed is returning" (the boys were just rounding the last curve of the path), "and perhaps I'll have the courage to—to kiss my little brother. Joany, you can kiss him too, and so can you, Norma," she said, a flood of tenderness sweeping over her. "I only wish every one could know such happiness as I—feel just now."

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